

The copy filmed here has been reproduced thanks to the generosity of:

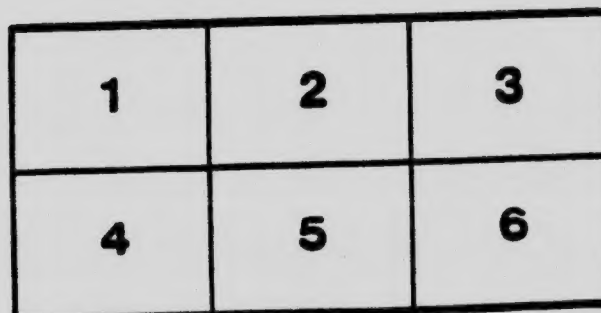
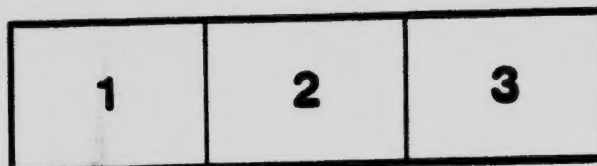
National Library of Canada

The images appearing here are the best quality possible considering the condition and legibility of the original copy and in keeping with the filming contract specifications.

Original copies in printed paper covers are filmed beginning with the front cover and ending on the last page with a printed or illustrated impression, or the back cover when appropriate. All other original copies are filmed beginning on the first page with a printed or illustrated impression, and ending on the last page with a printed or illustrated impression.

The last recorded frame on each microfiche shall contain the symbol $\rightarrow$ (meaning "CONTINUED"), or the symbol ∇ (meaning "END"), whichever applies.

Maps, plates, charts, etc., may be filmed at different reduction ratios. Those too large to be entirely included in one exposure are filmed beginning in the upper left hand corner, left to right and top to bottom, as many frames as required. The following diagrams illustrate the method:



L'exemplaire filmé fut reproduit grâce à la générosité de:

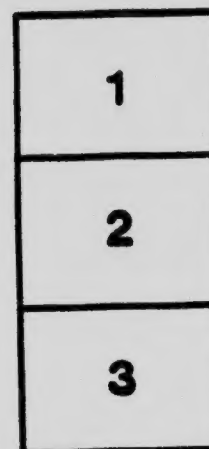
Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

Les images suivantes ont été reproduites avec le plus grand soin, compte tenu de la condition et de la netteté de l'exemplaire filmé, et en conformité avec les conditions du contrat de filmage.

Les exemplaires originaux dont la couverture en papier est imprimée sont filmés en commençant par le premier plat et en terminant soit par la dernière page qui comporte une empreinte d'impression ou d'illustration, soit par le second plat, selon le cas. Tous les autres exemplaires originaux sont filmés en commençant par la première page qui comporte une empreinte d'impression ou d'illustration et en terminant par la dernière page qui comporte une telle empreinte.

Un des symboles suivants apparaîtra sur la dernière image de chaque microfiche, selon le cas: le symbole $\rightarrow$ signifie "A SUIVRE", le symbole ∇ signifie "FIN".

Les cartes, planches, tableaux, etc., peuvent être filmés à des taux de réduction différents. Lorsque le document est trop grand pour être reproduit en un seul cliché, il est filmé à partir de l'angle supérieur gauche, de gauche à droite, et de haut en bas, en prenant le nombre d'images nécessaire. Les diagrammes suivants illustrent la méthode.

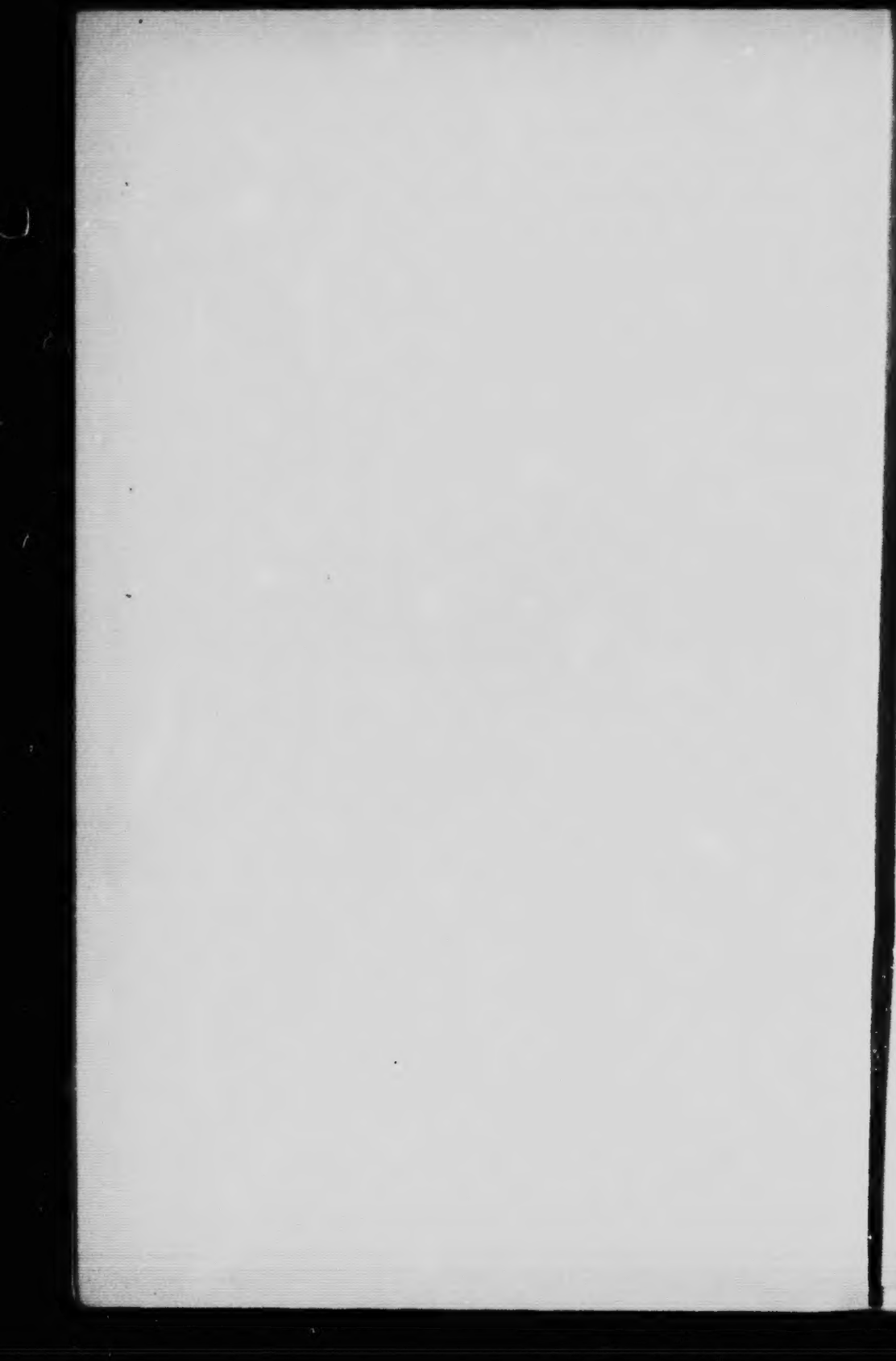


114

50th

1st Can En

191-2



THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

BY
CECIL ADAIR

AUTHOR OF
"THE DEAN'S DAUGHTER," "CANTACUTE TOWERS," ETC.



TORONTO
THE COPP, CLARK CO. LIMITED

PR 4699

E84

Q34

1911

P**x

09601837

CONTENTS

BOOK I—CHILDHOOD

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. A FIRST ADVENTURE	9
II. THE SOLDIER UNCLE	15
III. ANTICIPATIONS	21
IV. THE SEVENTH BIRTHDAY	27
V. THE HOUSE OF DARE	33
VI. TO THE RESCUE	39
VII. WIDENING HORIZONS	45
VIII. OPENING GATES	51

BOOK II—GIRLHOOD

IX. CHANGE;	57
X. MOTHER MERCY	63
XI. MISS MARJORIBANKS	69
XII. REAL OLD MAIDS	75
XIII. SCHOOL	81
XIV. GIRL FRIENDSHIPS	87
XV. ESCAPADES	93
XVI. MRS DALE	101

BOOK III—THE DEBUTANTE

CHAPTER	PAGE
XVII. PARK LANE	107
XVIII. ENTER MERCY	113
XIX. MERCY'S BALL	119
XX. SCHOOLMATES	125
XXI. COUSINS	131
XXII. ANOTHER ENCOUNTER	138
XXIII. MERCY'S GUESTS	144
XXIV. COMING OF AGE	150
XXV. DARE	156
XXVI. SUMMER PICTURES	163
XXVII. GOD SAVE THE KING	169
XXVIII. HOME SWEET HOME	175

BOOK IV—THE LADY OF QUALITY

XXIX. AFTER MANY DAYS	181
XXX. GOLDEN SUMMER DAYS	187
XXXI. DALE OR DARE	193
XXXII. THE TRAGEDY OF YOUNG LOVE	200
XXXIII. LOVE'S MIRACLE	206

CONTENTS

7

	CHAPTER	PAGE
	XXXIV. IN THE AIR !	212
PAGE	XXXV. DANGER ZONE !	218
107	XXXVI. A BATTLE OF WILLS	224
113	XXXVII. A DAINY VENGEANCE	230
119	XXXVIII. SWEPT AWAY	236
125	XXXIX. IN THE STUDIO	242
131	XL. COLIN	248
138	XLI. CHRISTMAS	254
144	XLII. TWO BRIDES	260
150	XLIII. THE WIFE OF DARE	267
156	XLIV. MERCY ENTERTAINS	273
163	XLV. FOUND DROWNED !	279
169	XLVI. THE VICTIM OF DARE	285
175	XLVII. AT HER MERCY	291
	XLVIII. IN THE WOODS	297
	XLIX. WHOSE THE DEED	303
181	L. VENDETTA !	309
187	LI. BY A TIDELESS SEA	315
193	LII. CONCLUSION	322
200		
206		



The Qualities of Mercy

BOOK I

CHILDHOOD

CHAPTER I

A FIRST ADVENTURE

MERCY was six years old. The seventh birthday of which she thought such great things was looming upon the horizon of her sky. In six weeks it would be here. But six weeks sounds to six years a period of portentous length.

"When I am seven I shall be growed up," Mercy asserted; and Captain Muggs, who knew most things, wagged an assenting tail. The quality of Mercy's r's was still somewhat uncertain, though her grandmother, Lady Sarah Quentin, took great pains to teach the child a clear enunciation and a correct method of speech. As Mercy lived her life almost entirely amongst grown-ups, and was of an observant and initiative turn, her powers of expression were in advance of her years; and so, perhaps, were some of her ideas.

"Gwown-up people go out when they like. I *fink* I will go out too, by myself, with you, Muggy darling; and p'waps if we do we'll have an adventure."

This was how it came about that, upon a particularly charming day in late April, Mercy, attended by Captain Muggs, committed that audacious breach of rule which she afterwards spoke of as "wunning away."

Captain Muggs was Mercy's shadow. The pair were

10 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

seldom seen apart. He shared her games ; he attended her walks ; her day-nursery was his citadel, and he slept at the door of her night-nursery. He lay in the hall when she took her dinner with her grandparents and a fluctuating company of uncles and aunts in the big panelled dining-room. When the uncles were at home, it was a regular and delightful game to see which of them could smuggle in Captain Muggs, and keep him hidden under the table from the Argus eyes of the grandparents ! Mercy would choke and gurgle with laughter, and grow hot and cold with excitement as the meal proceeded. She would feel the dog's blunt nose upon her knee, and quiver and shiver with a sense of the enormity of somebody's courage, and the certainty of eventual discovery.

Sometimes grandmother would lift her delicately aquiline nose and give a little sniff. . . . " I am sure there is a dog in the room," she would say. Or grandfather would catch somebody surreptitiously feeding Captain Muggs, and would stamp his foot upon the floor with a stern word of command : " Get out, you brute ! "

Then the brindled dog would fly, the butler holding the door for his exit with as much ceremony as though he were one of the family, which he was in Mercy's eyes.

He was her own discovery—her special protégé. It was she who had seen a wicked man beating the lanky, half-starved puppy, and had sacrificed a bright half-crown recently bestowed by Uncle Alec to save the poor dog, whom she had carried home in her mailcart, and taken with a long story to grandpapa, who had suffered her to keep the creature under certain well-defined conditions.

" A mongrel, my dear ; nothing but a mongrel," he had told her ; but Mercy loved him all the better for that. It was the uncles who had dubbed him " Muggs " ; partly because of his mongrel parentage, partly because of his broad blunt nose and jowl—" a fine old mug of his own " Uncle Frank had called it. But as Mercy was not quite sure that she liked the name of Muggs, the soldier uncle gave him " brevet rank "—whatever that might be—and Captain Muggs became an institution at Quentin Easter.

A FIRST ADVENTURE

II

So when Mercy made up her mind to the daring act of running away, it followed as a matter of course that Captain Muggs should accompany her upon her flight.

"We'll go into the fairies' wood," said Mercy, and Captain Muggs wagged an assenting tail.

Mercy loved the fairies' wood; but nobody would ever stay in it as long as she wanted. To get to it you had to go all through the shrubberies outside the gardens, and cross one meadow, and that brought you to the little foot-bridge over the stream that was always laughing and trying to tell you things. Mercy was sure she would understand in time what it said; only nobody would ever wait long enough. And over the bridge was that lovely region of copse, which to Mercy was an enchanted forest, where the primroses, the bluebells, the wood anemones, and the shy wood-sorrel grew so abundantly according to their season. This was the wood where the fairies lived, where they came out to dance at night to the music of the river. Mercy found little treasures from time to time which they had dropped—tiny cups, little red balls, fluffy green tufts—all sorts of treasures to which the grown-ups would give prosaic, ugly names often; but which Mercy knew very well had been the fairies' playthings or adornments, and which always withered away when they were taken from the fairies' wood.

The trouble was that the grown-ups had to keep to the paths, and it was not on the paths that these things were to be found, but away in the trackless intricacies of the forest, where Mercy's feet loved to stray, and where Captain Muggs rooted and snuffed with such limitless delight: only they were always being called back to the prose of life and the beaten track. And Mercy wanted to explore this fairy region alone and undisturbed.

And so upon this exquisite April day she eluded observation, and ran away. And Captain Muggs aided and abetted.

Mercy had never before been beyond the gardens alone. This dash across the smiling meadow was like the sortie of a forlorn hope—a thing to be taken at full tilt, with beating heart and eyes wide with wonder and excitement. Would

12 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

anyone see them, and trumpet the recall which there was no disobeying?

But no! Fortune favoured the little fugitive. Here was the bridge; yonder was the wood! To-day she dared not linger to listen to the song of the rippling water. She plunged headlong into the hazel copse, and, avoiding all beaten tracks, raced through the tangled undergrowth with eager feet, till she felt she had left the world behind. Then, sinking down parting at the foot of a giant oak which reared its bare branches out of a tangle of clasping and adoring ivy, she flung her arms about the neck of Captain Muggs, crying out between gusts of panting breath and baby laughter.

"Oh, Captain Muggs, we've wunned away—we've wunned away!"

Then began one of those rambles which belong to the golden era of childhood, where every flower is a gem fit for a diadem, every shadowy nook a lurking-place for mystery, every green glade a road towards some possible ecstasy of adventure.

Here was the tinkling music of some little laughing rivulet, to which the child-ears listened in a speechless rapture. There grew those delicate mosses which formed the fairy tables for moonlight feasts and elfin revels.

Here was a little open dell, alive with the frolics of rabbits, who scattered and vanished at sight of Captain Muggs in a flurry of white scuts: yonder a squirrel, racing up a perpendicular trunk, stared down from some lofty height at the intruders, evoking from Mercy a cry of rapture and loving entreaty, to which no heed was paid; for the squirrel declined all blandishment, and whisked away into the mystery of twig and tiny leaf-tassels far away overhead.

Then Captain Muggs discovered a prickly ball of spines, which he was convinced he had seen walking about a moment before. The Captain's philosophy invariably broke down over a hedgehog—an aggravating monstrosity which would not run, but yet was indubitably alive. The woodland rang to the sound of his barkings, and no doubt this was what called the attention of the only other inmate of

this region of trees and undergrowth and flowers, who had been walking up and down an adjacent green ride, with a book in his hands, which he now transferred to the pocket of his long black coat.

This intruder into Mercy's adventure was a tall and rather loosely knit figure of a man in correct clerical dress. He was quite young, and had just come to Quentin Hatch as curate to the old rector there. He had a pink and white face and a crop of curly yellow hair, and Mercy recognised him the moment she saw him, although she was ignorant of his name, after the manner of young children.

She was not exactly pleased at the intrusion of a grown-up into her wonder-world; but at least this one had no authority over her, and his smile was one which demanded another in response.

Perhaps he felt that it was for him to explain his presence here; and he evidently recognised the small white maiden.

"I am not trespassing," he said, with a smile, "for Mr Quentin very kindly gave me the freedom of this very attractive wood of his. On such a day as this it seems a shame to be within walls. You seem to feel the same yourself, I think."

"I wunned away—with Captain Muggs," explained Mercy frankly. "You don't need to tell about me, do you?"

"Certainly not. That is no part of my duty. Do you know who I am, little Miss Runaway?"

"Yes, I do. You belong to the church. I see you there. Captain Muggs doesn't know you, 'cause he stops outside the lych-gate till we come out. Uncle Alec calls you Chera Bim, and Uncle Fwank calls you Sucking Pig." As there was no immediate response to this confidence Mercy went on, "Little weeny pigs are sweet! I go to see them every day. I'd love to kiss them if I might. I wouldn't a bit mind being a little piggy-wee; but I don't think I should like to be Chera Bim."

"Why not?" asked the stranger a trifle absently. His face was very pink, Mercy decided, and he really was

14 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

rather like a dear little pink pig—only he was *so* much bigger.

"Why, because he's a very naughty boy," explained Mercy. "At least I think so. For grandmamma tells me I am naughty if I cry only a little. But Chera Bim and Sera Fim continually do cry." Mercy *has* dropped her voice and added with a touch of awe, "And I rather think that they cry in church—and I never do that."

"No; you don't do that. You behave very well in church. I've noticed that myself. You belong to Quentin Easter—the big house that these woods belong to."

"Yes. You see my daddy was the eldest son, only he was killed in India. That was long, long ago—before I was born. I came here to be borned, and my mother died too. I've heard nurse say so. And so I've always lived here; 'cause I've not got any other home. But I've got lots of uncles and aunts. The aunts is all mawwied; but they come and stay—and some of them bwing babies. There's Auntie Hilda, and Auntie Grace, and Auntie May; and then there's Uncle Fwank, who's a bawwister, and Uncle Alec, who's a soldier—I think I love him most, 'cause my daddy was a soldier—and Uncle Roddy, who's a sailor. I've almost forgotten him; but he's coming back soon. I like it when there are plenty of uncles, and so does Captain Muggs. Muggy dear, *how* thirsty you have made yourself barking like that! And he won't uncurl—they are so silly! Oh, look at Captain Muggs! He hears something coming. Oh, shall I wun away, do you think? No, I won't. Captain Muggs is pleased! Oh, it's only Uncle Alec on his big black horse! Uncle Alec doesn't count!"

And Mercy ran forward with outstretched arms and an adorable smile of welcome.

CHAPTER II

THE SOLDIER UNCLE

THE horseman paused, and looked down from his lofty seat at the pair in confabulation upon the confines of the green ride.

"Hillo, kiddie! What you doing here?"

"Oh, Uncle Alec, I've wunned away! I wanted to be in my fairy wood with just only Captain Muggs, and nobody to say 'come along,' just at the interestingest time. And I met Mr Sucking Pig, and we've been talking about it. And we fink it's much nicer to be a sucking pig than a Chera Bim. And I'm going to ask grandpapa if I may take him to see the little pigs some day. They are so sweet!"

Alec Quentin was a handsome young fellow some twenty years older than his small niece. As he swung himself to earth, the face bronzed by the kisses of India's sun showed a red flush beneath the deep tan; but the frank blue eyes looked straight into those of the young cleric, and the soldier saved the situation by bursting into hearty, wholesome laughter. Next moment both men were laughing together like schoolboys. Alec threw the reins of his horse to Captain Muggs, who caught them deftly between shining rows of white teeth. The horse stooped his velvet nose and sniffed gently at the muzzle of his canine friend. Then he nibbled delicately at the lush green grass, and Captain Muggs moved step by step onwards with him, but always intent upon his duty with the reins.

"These *enfants terribles*!" laughed Alec. "A family like ours ought not to indulge in the luxury of a little pitcher on the premises! We have sobriquets for everything and everybody, and our charity begins very much at home. I have a choice selection to my own count. All the same I apologise, in the name of the family."

16 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"You need not. It is fate. I was Sucking-pig or Guinea-pig at school, and at college the Cherub. I used to resolve upon the career of a pirate, to take out the pink and white! Well, when I have passed my probation and gained a little experience, I am going to see what a city slum will do in that direction."

"Or come out to India and see what sort of work there is for a black coat there."

"I've thought of that also. One thinks of a good many fields of enterprise. I've sometimes thought that an army chaplain in a marching regiment would be fine work."

"Might be," spoke Alec Quentin, "some of the finest in the world. We want better men than we often get for our Tommies. Fine fellows they are too! Some of the best in the world. But often as not a light-hearted, dare-devil, godless lot."

Mercy was listening with all her ears. She liked to hear her uncles talk, particularly Uncle Alec, who was her especial hero. It did not matter in the least that she understood very little of what passed. There was always a certain subconscious apprehension of the drift of the talk, which would recur to her later, and fill her with new ideas.

She watched the two men in conversation. They were both tall and broad-shouldered; but Uncle Alec had the fine, upright carriage of the soldier, and all his clothes fitted him so well. His riding-breeches and boots were a source of endless joy and admiration to Mercy. And she thought that the long flopping coat and the funny round collar and buttonless waistcoat of the curate made a very poor comparison. Both were fair men; but the soldier's hair was cropped close to his head, whilst his drooping moustache was long. The other had longer hair and no moustache at all, and Mercy rather liked the wide flexible lines of the mouth, though the face was nothing like so handsome, she decided, as Uncle Alec's.

But they both had something of the same *look* as they talked, that Mercy was quite aware of. And when they gripped hands at parting she was convinced that they liked one another.

"I must be getting home with this young runaway, or they will be sending the crier round! Will you put her up in front of me? No, not a bit—she's frightened at nothing of that sort, are you, my bird? Come in and look me up some evening. We'll have another talk. I've another couple of months' leave to run yet; but I'll have to sail again before the fun of the year begins, worse luck!"

"The killing?"

"Just so—the killing. Well we get pig-sticking out yonder, and shooting of sorts. And over here they're spoiling things terribly. I hate your drives of half-tame birds. Give me rough shooting over dogs, and plenty of honest tramping to get them. It's these rich bounders who don't know one end of a gun from the other who spoil everything—vulgarise everything—and turn sport into butchery. Here, boy; here! Bring along your charge. That's the style. Here we are. Now, Mercy, will you ride home with me?"

The child's face was all aglow. Nothing more delighted her than a breathless gallop perched up in front of one of her uncles, on the back of the tall, beautiful horses they rode. Her own shaggy pony was a darling, and her rides a joy; but they lacked that breathless element of romance which attended the sweeping gallops of the Quentin menfolk.

"Mr Earle will put you up. There we are! Get one little paw in his mane, and I'll hold you all safe. Ready? Thanks, Earle. So long! See you again soon."

"Good-bye. . . . Thank you. . . . I hope we shall meet again."

Mercy smiled down from her high perch with the air of a young queen, and spoke words which she had heard in the mouths of the grown-ups when farewells were passing.

Next minute they were off and away along one of the wide green glades which seemed taking them into the heart of a deep mysterious wood. One half of Mercy's mind knew that presently they would emerge just on the outskirts of the home farm, and proceed quietly and prosaically along a road into the stableyard beyond. But the other half—the one which was really herself—saw in this forest a region of

18 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

wonder, mystery and adventure. A grim, dark castle with battlements and a haunted tower might rise up before them at any moment. Or a band of armed men might meet them, with whom Uncle Alec would have to fight for dear dear life. Or they might hear the piercing cries of some beautiful captive maiden, whom they must needs release. Or there might be hobgoblins to encounter, or a witch woman casting spells.

The joy of that headlong gallop through the spaces of sunny woodland, or dim valleys of pine and fir, where all these possible adventures might meet them, held Mercy mute and breathless.

Alas ! it was over all too soon. Here was the farm, with its friendly, familiar aspect, its sunny spaces of yard and croft, its pond, where the ducks were splashing and gobbling, and all the pleasant familiar sights dear to Mercy's heart, but too comfortable and prosaic to smatter of mystery.

" Uncle Alec, let's go and see the little calves and pigs ! " she pleaded ; and he, always good-natured to the baby of the house (the pathos of whose orphaned life she was wholly unconscious of, though it had given her a certain power at Quentin Easter ever since the day on which she saw light there), assented willingly, gave his horse into the charge of a lad, and walked off with his small niece hanging to his hand, and Captain Muggs making excursions hither and thither with the air of one to whom the region was quite familiar and more or less under his personal supervision.

At the pig pen Mercy stood long, gazing with a subdued rapture of admiration at the antics and nuzzlings of a large litter of small white pigs. In a neighbouring pen there was a big black sow, with an equally large litter. Uncle Alec declared in favour of the blacks ; but Mercy hesitated.

" It's that little one there in the corner that I love best. He has such a sweet face—all pink and white. Just like what Uncle Fwank said about Mr . . . Mr . . . "

" Mr Earle, kiddie, the new curate. Now, when you've quite finished your adoration of pigs and poultry, I've got something to say to you ; and you've got to listen and try to understand ! "

THE SOLDIER UNCLE

19

Now there were few things which Mercy more appreciated than having things explained to her. So often the grown-ups talked over her head, mystified and puzzled her, and then laughed at her bewildered face.

So Mercy, like so many other small children, learned to put on the air of absorption and indifference. She appeared not to hear, even when she was devouring every word. Whether she understood it or not, she must always listen to the talk that went on about her. It might go in at one ear and out at the other: it might get mixed up and tangled with her own thoughts and dreams; but always a residuum remained to ponder over and try and make sense of. And if people would only explain things to her in a way she could understand, that was a great joy to her.

Uncle Alec swung her up into the fork of a gnarled old apple-tree. He seated himself opposite in another similar fork. Their heads were about on a level, and Mercy eyed him sedately.

"Are you going to scold me, Uncle Alec, because I wurned away?"

"Not I, kiddie; that's not my show. I've nothing to do with your running away, except to bring you back when I find you. What I want to explain is something else. Kiddie, did you ever hear the word honour? Do you know what it means?"

"I . . . I . . . *fin*k so, Uncle Alec. Bwave men are hon-'wable . . . like the knights and cwusaders . . . and like you. . . ."

Mercy's powers of expression were limited; but the soldier uncle nodded. He saw she had gripped the root idea.

"It's not only brave men who have to be honourable. It's all of us—men, women and little children. And one thing which no honourable person ever does is to betray a trust."

"What's that, Uncle Alec?"

"It is a great many things, kiddie; I'll tell you one of them. It's not honourable to repeat things about other people which we have heard spoken, but which have been

20 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

spoken perhaps carelessly, or mockingly, or casually. We may do a great deal of harm as we go through life if we repeat to the people spoken about, the things we have heard said. We may hurt their feelings badly and make a great deal of mischief. . . ."

"Oh, Uncle Alec, I didn't know! Do you mean about . . . sucking pig?"

"Yes, kiddie—that was a silly thing you had heard; and it might, if Mr Earle had been a different sort of man, have hurt his feelings or have made him angry. You didn't know; but I want you to begin to know now. One of the things which we must not do as we go through life is to take tales of what we hear spoken to the persons they are spoken about. It is better, if we hear foolish jokes or ill-natured things said, to try and forget them and to tell nobody at all about them. It is also a good plan to try and keep guard over our own lips, that we do not make foolish or unkind remarks. But the thing I want to make you understand to-day is that it is not honourable to repeat to others things we may by chance have heard spoken about them. Will you try and remember that, kiddie?"

Mercy nodded her head emphatically, turning the injunction over and over in her mind.

And thus she began to gain her first definite impression concerning the quality of honour.

CHAPTER III

ANTICIPATIONS

"UNCLE FWANK, do you *fin*k that when I awake on Thursday I shall find that I'm a little boy?"

Mercy's gravity was induced partly by the magnitude of the issue involved by her question; partly because it was Sunday morning, and she was dressed for church, and awaiting the appearance of grandmamma. Uncle Frank was also waiting for the ceremonious start across the park which was part of the Sunday routine at Quentin Easter. He and Mercy were sitting side by side upon the wide stone coping of the wide stone terrace, and Captain Muggs had his wide blunt nose upon Uncle Frank's knee; for the balustrade was quite low, though Mercy's little feet dangled in the air, and Captain Muggs seemed to await the answer as expectantly as Mercy herself; for of course Captain Muggs had been told all about this exciting possibility.

The following Thursday was to be a great day at Quentin Easter; for it was Mercy's seventh birthday, and there would be a fine assembly of uncles, aunts and little cousins to do honour to the occasion; and already something of a sense of her growing responsibilities was stealing upon the child with the slow advance of her numbered years.

"What makes you think that such a transformation is at all likely, Puss?"

Mercy liked taking questions to Uncle Frank. He always looked quite grave and serious over them, even though sometimes there was a twinkle in his brown eyes. He did not wear a yellow moustache like the soldier uncle, and you could see every bit of his face when he was talking, and he was very handsome in Mercy's eyes, and also in the opinion of the world at large. The Quentin dower of good looks was re-

22 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

garded almost as a matter of course. Mercy's own child-face was delicately featured, framed in soft yellow curls, and lighted by a pair of big grey eyes set meditatively somewhat far apart, and shaded by very thick and rather short black lashes which matched the delicate black arch of the brows. This combination of black and gold, with the delicately tinted rose-leaf skin and the dreamy pencilled grey of the eyes formed an attractive combination, which the child's unconsciously high-bred way of holding herself and moving did much to accentuate.

"It was Hughie said it," explained Mercy, "at least he didn't exactly say it; and when I said it he said 'Bosh!' But then boys don't always understand things, do they, Uncle Fwank?"

"Let us be thankful, my child, for the blunt and limited perceptions of the genus *homo minor*. Boys know all that is good for them—and something over. We will not desire for the young lords of creation any acuter perceptions than those with which nature has endowed them."

Mercy gurgled gently. She loved to hear Uncle Frank talking like this. She knew that he was poking fun at boys in general and at Hughie in particular, and she took up her word again:

"Hughie told me his very own self that in seven years people changed into somefing else; he said there wasn't a bit left of the self before. So p'waps on Thursday I shall be a boy; that's what I said; and Hughie said 'Bosh!' But he couldn't esplain why it was bosh. Uncle Fwank, what do you fink?"

"Do you want to be a boy, Mercy?"

"Not so very particularly—for mine own self. But it's about grandpapa I'm finking chiefly."

"What about grandpapa, Puss?"

"You see, when nurse tells people about me; and that my daddy and my muvver died before I was borned, people always say that it was so sad for grandpapa, and such a pity that I wasn't a boy. So if I *could* change into one, and come downstairs a little boy, don't you fink it would be a very big surprise? Would they be very pleased do you fink?"

"They would certainly be very much surprised; but I am not sure that they would be so particularly pleased. They have got used to the little girl-grandchild now; and people when they grow old are not very fond of change."

Mercy heaved a little sigh between disappointment and relief.

"I did fink of asking God in church to-day to make me into a little boy. But p'waps I won't, after all."

"I think I would not. Grandpapa is quite satisfied with his little maid; and I like little girls better than little boys."

She slipped her hand into his confidently, and Captain Muggs wagged his tail and put forth a warm pink tongue towards the interlacing fingers.

"Uncle Fwank, is grandpapa very, very old?"

"He is getting on in years, Puss."

"Not as old as Noah or Mefuselah?"

"Not quite. People don't seem to live so long as that now. The world would get too crowded, you see."

Mercy's eyes were growing dreamy and big.

"Uncle Fwank, if grandpapa were to die, who would all this belong to that's his now—to grandmamma?"

"Probably for her lifetime to grandmamma."

"And afterwards, if grandmamma died—what then?"

"What do you think, Mercy?"

She moved a little to look up into his face.

"To you, Uncle Fwank, I should fink. Isn't it you who is next oldest to my daddy—of his brothers, I mean. It's always the men who have things, Hughie says. And my daddy can't, 'cause he's dead."

Frank Quentin lifted the little girl upon his knee, and looked down into the small earnest face.

"Your daddy left a little bit of himself behind him, in his little daughter, Mercy. And Master Hughie doesn't know everything, being only a boy. And besides, who is the sovereign of all England and this great empire of which Great Britain is the centre?"

"Why, the Queen, of course, Uncle Fwank."

"So men do not always get everything? Well, might it not be possible some day for Quentin Easter to have a little

24 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

queen of its own? Have you never thought of such a thing as that, Mercy?"

She gazed up into his face, her eyes wide with wonder and with a dim sense of coming events too big to be grappled with.

"Me, Uncle Fwank?"

"I can't tell you, Mercy; for I don't know myself. It is for grandpapa to settle. He can do as he wishes. But I do not want Quentin Easter. I want to make my own career. Old Uncle Quentin left me plenty of money. I shall take silk soon and write Q.C. after my name."

Mercy dimpled and sparkled and wriggled on his knee.

"I know what that means. Nurse calls me that sometimes. I asked Hughie what it meant and he said Queer Customer. Is that what you want to be, Uncle Fwank?"

"That's it, Puss; I'm qualifying for the distinction. And I want to think—as I do think—that dear old Jack's little daughter will one day rule the roost here. Mercy, do you remember what the Queen said when, as a little girl, it dawned upon her that she might one day have so much power in her hands?"

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'I will be good.' That was the first thing that came into her head. And because she has been a good queen, Mercy, she has been a great one; and from end to end of this big world there are millions of men who would die for her gladly if it would serve her or help her. It is the goodness that counts in the long run in this queer mixed-up world of ours. Take care of the goodness, and the greatness will take care of itself."

Then grandpapa and grandmamma came out of the garden door together, into the brilliant sunshine of the May morning, which had taken on the shining that belongs to June.

For June had almost come. Mercy had made her appearance in the world upon that Glorious First of June which has passed into a proverb by now. She looked like a bit of June herself, in her white embroidered frock, and big white hat with its wreath of wild roses round the crown;

sunshine in her hair and sunshine in her eyes ; albeit, just at this moment the child's face wore one of its thoughtful expressions, as though a filmy veil had been drawn across it, turning the light inward for a brief moment.

Following her parents came Hilda Quentin—now Lady Leigh—and she held her ten-year-old son by the hand. Alec brought up the rear, and Mercy danced to her grandmother's side, and asked :

" Do I walk with you to-day, Gwanny, or do I go with Hughie ? " For on ordinary Sundays the grandparents walked side by side down the wide path through the park which led to Quentin Hatch village and the parish church, and Mercy held her grandmother's hand, whilst Captain Muggs paced solemnly behind them, and was left beneath the shelter of the lych-gate whilst the service proceeded.

" You can go on in front with Hughie, my dear. But both of you remember what day it is."

An old-fashioned English home, steeped in the old-fashioned traditions—traditions in which those men were reared who have built up a great and glorious empire, and were the makers of history which will live gloriously through all the ages.

Perhaps it was with some perception of this thing that Hilda turned to her mother and spoke impetuously.

" I wish I could bring up my children as you are bringing up Mercy ; but it does not seem possible. There is a new spirit abroad in the world. We have to move with the times."

Mercy and her boy cousin walked on through the smiling meadow-land, where the waving grass was growing ripe for the joys of haymaking in another month's time. It was a little puzzle to Mercy that Hugh should be four years older than herself, when daddy was older than Aunt Hilda. But then Dick and Babs were younger—the small brother and sister who would arrive on Tuesday with Hugh's father, who could not get away before.

" My dad's got such lots of things to see to," Hughie remarked, with his lordly air. " I'm goin' to learn all about land and stock and parliament and the bench myself soon.

26 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

'Cause some day I shall be Sir Hugh myself, and everything will be mine. I rather think perhaps, when that's all settled, that I may marry you, Mercy. A man has got to marry somebody, you know. And you're not half a bad kid for a girl."

"I sha'n't mawwy you, Hughie; at least I don't fink I shall," was Mercy's discouraging reception of this confidence.

"Why on earth not?" The boy was taken aback.

"'Cause I don't fink you'll be good enough. I only like people who are very good. I'm going to be very good myself."

"You're a precious little prig—that's what you are!"

But in Mercy's present mood the taunt did not sting.

"No, I'm not. But you don't understand. You're only a boy, you know. Boys don't."

"Oh, I say—that's a good 'un!"

"Uncle Fwank said it!"

Mercy was triumphant and Hugh taken aback. The little girl walked into church with a curious feeling of having a great many big things to think about. She sat, stood or knelt with due decorum between her grandparents, and looked over grandpapa's big print Prayer Book, with the little lettering all in red that made it look so pretty.

"The lines are fallen unto me in a pleasant place; yea I have a goodly heritage!"

Mercy gazed at the words in the book and then lifted big eyes to her grandfather's face, to find him gazing down at her with meanings in his eyes that she could not fathom yet.

CHAPTER IV

THE SEVENTH BIRTHDAY

MERCY rose upon that brilliant summer's morning with a sense of solemnity upon her spirit.

The great house of Quentin Easter was full from end to end. All those suites of rooms in the wings habitually shut up, through which Mercy loved to steal, tiptoeing and breathless, conjuring up images of beruffled ladies and long-haired cavaliers, were now allotted to uncles, aunts and little cousins; to bigger cousins of a generation behind that of Mercy: and the child had a dim, strange feeling that it was in some sort her doing that this assemblage had mustered here. For to-day, upon this glorious first of June, she attained the ripe age of seven years; and this was to be her birthday party!

Her grandmother's brother had come—the Earl of Parminster, a very white-headed and benign old gentleman, whose befrilled linen and antiquely-cut coat carried the child back delightedly into the realms of a romantic past. His eldest son, with his very elegant wife, accompanied him, and these latter had brought their three children to make acquaintance with Mercy. Why the parents were Lord and Lady Dunmow and their children were all Mainwarings was one of the things Mercy puzzled over without asking questions. But she liked Jack very much. He was more polite than Hughie, and quite equal to speaking his mind to that young gentleman upon occasion. Mary, who was two years older than Mercy, was quite a darling, very pretty and with charming manners, and little Sally was simply sweet—like the prettiest and daintiest picture you ever saw, only very much alive! The other children were all familiar playfellows of Mercy; for the aunts brought them over from time to time to be with her. Dick and Babs were

28 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

Leighs, Hughie's brother and sister: Tot and Dot were Aunt May's pigeon pair; and little Gem—George Edgar Maltby—was Aunt Grace's only child, a small boy with rather babyish ways and hair still worn in curls, which Hughie pulled unmercifully; but quite a crony of Mercy's for all that, because in some ways he shared her thoughts with a greater measure of understanding.

"Many happy returns. . . ." "Many yappy 'turns. . . ." "There's something for you." "Dis for oo." "Me dod tumefin' for Mercy!" "My turn now. Catch hold!" "Oh, butter-fingers!" "Let me help you . . . you can't hold them all!" Mercy, on emerging from her room, found herself the centre of a laughing, eager group of little cousins of various degrees; and Jack's offer of aid to struggle with all the parcels showered upon her was welcome and appreciated.

They carried them all into the big day-nursery, all decorated with boughs of flowering shrubs and with a wealth of flowers. They cut the strings and revealed the contents—icing-looking story-books in brilliant bindings and full of pictures; boxes of bon-bons of entrancing beauty without and excellence within; toys and dolls, tea sets and railway trains, delicious model animals of a surprisingly life-like aspect, some of whom could make noises of so superior an order that Captain Muggs, excited by the stir in the house, and somewhat worried by the large crimson bow upon his collar, had much ado to refrain from seizing and shaking them to death on the spot. Indeed these beasts and birds had to be set up in a row upon the high mantelshelf, for when put upon a lower shelf, which was thought at first to be well out of Captain Muggs' reach, he was found next minute sitting upon it, with a woolly lamb in his mouth, and nurse had to be called in to transfer the menagerie to a higher altitude; Captain Muggs sitting on his haunches below, and staring up at the row with fixed and baleful eyes.

It was a merry and a happy meal to which all the little folks sat down together in the big oriel window of the nursery, every pane of which was set wide open to sunshine and soft airs.

Later on Mercy was crowned with flowers and led downstairs and so into the great dining-hall, where the household-party was seated at breakfast. Hughie and Jack walked one on each side of her. Gem held up the fine strip of brocade which they had pinned to her shoulders, and which was long enough to trail upon the floor like a queen's train. The other little cousins walked in procession hand in hand behind—a lovely picture of childish beauty and grace, which drew and held all eyes.

Mercy's face was curiously wistful in its expression. It seemed as though struggling thoughts, too big for formulation or comprehension, were seeking for some method of expression; and from time to time the child's lips moved, as though she were rehearsing words which never audibly passed her lips.

"I will be good. I will be good." That was the formula to which this little queen of the day clung hard and fast, as though within the scope of those words lay some talisman by which a more complete understanding of the riddle of life could be arrived at.

In the happy babble and clamour of children's voices, perhaps few noticed how seldom Mercy's tones were heard, save as she thanked the different aunts, uncles and cousins for the presents showered upon her in such abundance.

These were many of them costly gifts, such as the child had no present use for: a string of pearls from the picturesque old great-uncle, a silver goblet from Lord and Lady Dunmow, some rich embroideries and costly trinkets in ivory, silver or feather-work from the aunts, and from the grandmother some richly-bound books in a case with gilt clasps, such as people used in church, and which Mercy often gazed at with admiring eyes, but never thought to possess for herself.

"And what do you think I have got for you, little one?" queried grandpapa; and Mercy, looking up at him as she stood between his knees, answered quaintly:

"I fink I've had enough presents for one day, grandpapa. It's very nice; but it gets rather confusing. Will you

30 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

please tell everybody how much obliged I am? You would do it so much more pwooperer than me."

So the speech was made with due solemnity; but then the two tall uncles possessed themselves of Mercy's small hands, and Mary Mainwaring released her from her wreath and train at a sign from one of the grown-ups, after which the little queen of the day was led outside into the entrance courtyard, where the crowning surprise of the whole day awaited her:

A small pony phaeton drawn by a pair of the prettiest ponies, big ponies, with shining bay coats, arching necks and delicately pawing feet. On the mounting block just beside the steps reposed a bran-new saddle and bridle—just the right size for Mercy and the ponies.

"The ponies from grandpapa, the carriage from the uncles," sang out a voice over the bewildered and enraptured child's head. "Who's for a drive round the park? In with you, as many as can cram! I'll take the rest of you when we get back. Here, Mercy, you'll have the seat of honour beside me!"

Uncle Alec was already in possession of driving box and reins. Mercy was lifted in beside him, and a tiny trot put upon her knees. Three little girls were packed in somehow behind, the boys rushed on ahead as outriders, racing along till their breath gave out, and then falling back to await the return of the fairy chariot, when they in turns had the joy of a spin behind the fast-stepping ponies.

"Will you teach me how to dwive them mine own self?" asked Mercy, very quiet and still in her great happiness and wonder.

"Of course I will, kiddie, give you a lesson every day till I leave, which will be very soon now, worse luck. But Uncle Frank will be here when the courts rise, and he'll take you on. And as for riding, nobody needs teach you that. You were born in the saddle, like all the Quentins."

"I shall call them Honour and Glory," Mercy announced later in the day to a select audience who had been debating for some while what pair of names would best suit the

THE SEVENTH BIRTHDAY 31

handsome pair of ponies ; and the decision of their little mistress was received with acclamation.

But the great event of the day for Mercy was still to come. The tenants were feasted in big tents in the park. The children ran happily about watching the entertainment, as they had watched and delighted in the games and rustic sports which had occupied the earlier hours of the afternoon. Mercy knew almost all the people by sight, and a great many of them by name. Some of them had lived on Quentin property almost as long as the Quentins themselves.

She was very fond of the old people ; and they of her. She liked to sit in their cottages, or in the cottage gardens, and hear them talk about the things which they had done when they were boys and girls. Mercy thought that things were more interesting once, before there were railway trains and telegraphs and such lots of letters and newspapers to tell everybody just the same things all over the world.

"It *must* have been more interesting to live when things were history," she once explained to Hughie, who did not at all share her predilection for the archaic ; and though he had at once said "Rot !" Mercy remained of the same opinion still.

And now grandfather had summoned her. Grandmother and the uncles were there also, and quite a number of the grown-ups from the house-party ; and these were all grouped together upon the top terrace with the low balustrade, where Mercy had sat with Uncle Frank on Sunday morning, whilst all the tenants, who had now finished their tea, stood in a crowd on the terrace below, looking up at Mr Quentin, who stood at the head of the shallow flight of steps leading from one level to the other, and held Mercy's hand fast in his.

Then grandfather made a speech. He reminded the people, who were listening breathlessly to him, that upon the last occasion when they had been thus assembled, he had presented to them his eldest son, who had that day attained his majority, and who would in the course of nature (as they had then believed) become the ruling Quentin at Quentin Easter.

32 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

That hope and expectation had not been realised. God had willed it differently. His son had given his life for his country, and had died a soldier's death in a far-off land. But he had left behind him one to bear his name and carry forward the traditions of his house.

At this point Mr Quentin stooped, lifted Mercy from the ground beside him, and stood her upon the low wide coping of the balustrade, and having so placed her he laid his hand upon her head.

Before he could speak the cheering had broken out with a spontaneity and fervour which spoke volumes. It was not needful to finish that speech. The action in itself was enough. This child was known to all, was beloved by all. Born under circumstances of peculiar pathos, she had grown up in the midst of them, loving and beloved. They had often wondered whether one day she would reign where, had her father lived, he would have done upon his father's demise. And to-day this question was answered.

Mercy stood like one in a dream as words and a tumult of sound passed over her head. She half understood, and now Uncle Frank was just behind her. She felt his presence helpful, and he bent down and whispered in her ear :

" Say something to them, Mercy—out of your own head."

Perhaps he made a sign ; for all at once there was a deep silence where there had been such clamour before and in that silence Mercy spoke.

" Thank you very much for loving me. I love you all. I love Quentin Easter. I never want to be anywhere else. I shall live here always with you. I mean to try and be very good—like the Queen."

From somewhere in the park the band struck up the National Anthem. Amid cheers and sobs and waving of kerchiefs it was sung. Mercy's clear child's pipe seemed in measure to lead.

Then she jumped down and ran helter-skelter into the house. Over her child-spirit had rushed a great wave of emotion. Some glimmering perceptions had come to her of the qualities of great responsibilities.

CHAPTER V

THE HOUSE OF DARE

WHEN the excitement and the bustle of the birthday was over; when the guests little and the guests big had taken their departure; when even Uncle Alec had gone, leaving Mercy in tears to think of him so far away with his regiment in India, where her daddy had been killed; when the big house of Quentin Easter had settled down to a great silence and calm, then Mercy had time to cogitate in quietude of the happenings of that day, and ponder upon the meanings which they might bear.

It was then that one small incident of that day came back to her, and brought with it a pleasurable sensation of interest and of curiosity.

The incident was this. Late on in the afternoon, when the tenants had gone home, a number of small children from the houses in the neighbourhood had been brought by their parents; and Mercy and her little cousins feasted them in the gardens, where tea and cakes, together with strawberries and cream, were to be had galore; and the little people romped, danced and made merry to their hearts' content, to the strains of the band which had been enlivening the proceedings throughout the day.

Mercy knew most of these little people after a fashion, though children's parties and festivities did not play a large part in her life. Birthdays and festivals were honoured in this way; but in the main the child was kept to her nurseries, and lived in the environment of her own dream-world.

But amongst the children that afternoon Mercy saw a small dark-eyed boy, about her own size, who stood apart from the rest. He looked fragile and almost frightened;

34 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

and yet frightened did not seem quite the right word ; for Mercy noticed that he never shrank away when Captain Muggs came racing along in wild excitement, nearly knocking down anything in his way. Indeed, the little boy seemed to want to attract Captain Muggs to his side, and Mercy came upon him sitting down and clasping the big brindled dog round the neck. When Mercy came and he looked up, she was sure that there were tears hanging on the long black lashes.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked. "Did Captain Muggs hurt you? He doesn't mean to be rough; but he's so excited to-day. Band music always makes him like that."

"It isn't that. Only I love him so!"

Then Mercy sat down on the other side of Captain Muggs, feeling that here was a kindred soul.

"Who are you, please, little boy?" she asked.

"I'm Colin Dare," he answered.

Now that instantly interested Mercy. For about five miles off, in a country a good deal wilder than that which lay about her own home, there had stood empty for as long as she could remember a grim stone house in a tangled park, and when upon her rides she had asked what house it was she had always received reply: "Folks call it the House of Dare."

Dare was the name of the family that owned it; but death had been busy with the Dares in many quarters of the globe, and the old house had passed from one to another of that name, and for long no one of its possessors had come to live there. These were men who faced death in many ways—soldiering, exploring, sailing tropic seas swept by typhoons, heading bands of soldiers in local revolutions in distant lands, for the sheer love of fighting and adventure. Mercy had heard scraps of talk—enough to set her ears tingling; and only quite a few days ago Uncle Alec had spoken things in her hearing which now she better understood.

"I met that fellow Dare the other day," he told his mother. "The one who was up in Thibet, whom I met in Burmah. He is back home now; come into the old house

yonder. Says he may stop a bit here perhaps. He had a small boy with him : a cousin's child, he told me, to whom he's guardian. Kid was born in India, and looks like it ; sent over when his father died. Mother not named—probably dead also. I told him he might bring the young shaver along next Thursday and make acquaintance with Quentin Easter. I must look him up myself one of these days. Queer fish—like all the Dares ; but may be a decent sort of neighbour."

Other more pressing interests had put this matter out of Mercy's mind till she found herself sitting on the ground beside Colin Dare, with Captain Muggs between them.

"Does he belong to you?"

"Yes. I found him and brought him home from a wicked man who was beating him. I've adopted him. He's called Captain Muggs. He takes care of me and I love him."

"I love him too ; but I've nobody to take care of me."

Something in the way in which the small boy uttered this plaint went to Mercy's heart. She was so rich in those who cared for her. Then an inspiration seized her.

"There are some puppies in the yard. One of them is very like Captain Muggs. When he's a little older I'll bring him to you for your very own. When he's big enough he'll take care of you, like Captain Muggs takes care of me."

For a moment the child's eyes glistened and sparkled. But then a shadow seemed to fall, and his face quivered.

"Oh, I wonder—I wonder!" he sighed wistfully.

"What do you wonder?" asked Mercy, with interest. Then with a flash of inspiration she added, "Do you mean that you think the big Dare man wouldn't like it?"

She did not know how else to designate him ; but Colin was making signs of qualified assent.

"It isn't just that. He'd let me have him, I believe ; but if he got angry he might be cruel to him." The child's face became curiously convulsed, and deep in the dark eyes fires blazed and were reflected there. "If I had a little Captain Muggs of my very own, and Cousin Rolfe was cruel to him, I think—I think—that I should *kill* him."

36 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

This was one of Mercy's memories of her birthday—the little dark-eyed boy squatting on the ground with his arms round Captain Muggs, and gravely talking about killing that big bronzed man, whom later on Mercy saw in conversation with Uncle Alec. He looked many years older than her uncle; though later on in life she came to know that they were very much of an age. But Rolfe Dare had lived what is termed "hard," and his experiences had traced lines in his face which do not often appear so early in life.

Mercy's conference with little Colin had been broken off short by a clamour for her from her other guests. She had afterwards learned that he was eight years old, that he had lived all his life in India, till his cousin brought him to England some six weeks ago. Mercy was almost sure that he was not happy in the House of Dare, and she resolved to go and see him when she could manage it. But the weeks following upon her birthday were very busy ones for her. Little cousin guests stayed on, and she had to entertain them. Then came the departure of Uncle Alec to join his regiment, which made considerable quiet bustle in the house.

Only when summer had reached its height, when the hay was nearly in, and the aunts and cousins were all gone, making up parties for the sea or for Scotland or Norway or those various places of which Mercy was always hearing in connection with the late summer and early autumn, did the big house of Quentin Easter settle down to the still calm of an unbroken routine. Mercy's daily lessons were for a time suspended. She, too, was to have a week or two of "holiday"; and the brindled puppy, who promised to grow so astonishingly like his father, was growing apace, a daring, high-spirited, light-hearted specimen of puppyhood, over whose early education Mercy kept a close and interested watch.

It was soon known in the stableyard that Miss Mercy wanted Private Muggs for some special purpose of her own. The child was delighted at the name they had bestowed upon him there. "Private Muggs" seemed to link him up

with her own beloved companion, and yet not in such a way as to suggest a rivalry.

"When he's learned how to follow I'll take him in my little carriage to the House of Dare, and give him to Colin my own self. And I'll tell the big brown man that he must be good to him. I fink that Colin's afraid of him; but there isn't any reason why I should be afraid; and I won't be."

Mercy was learning to hold courage in high esteem. Her uncle's soldier stories were inspiring to the child. Her sailor uncle had recently performed some act of conspicuous daring in connection with an explosion on board a destroyer. And Uncle Frank had assured her that courage was not the prerogative of men. He had even gone so far as to say that he believed women to be quite as courageous as their husbands, brothers or sons, though the field of their activities was generally a different one. He had spoken words which Mercy conned over at her leisure, which she graved upon the tablets of her heart, as her manner was, to be considered and comprehended gradually, as mind and body developed.

"Moral courage is a finer quality than physical; for physical courage is often merely a question of physique and of environment. I walk up with moral courage it is the finest attribute in the world; but divorced from its mate, it as often as not makes for disintegration and revolutionary effort.

"The courage of your opinions: that is the thing to strive after. And this often means walking up to the cannon's mouth in a very real sense of the term.

"And the canker which is eating out the heart of the nation to-day is a form of cowardice which wraps itself up in a very specious disguise, and is called by the fine-sounding name of Expediency."

What did it matter that the listening child did not understand? Something in the depths of her spirit stirred and thrilled in response to words like these. The words themselves might be unintelligible, but the underlying meanings, the convictions and traditions they embodied — these

38 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

found response in the soul of the little Mercy, whose qualities were developing in silence in the environment of her stately home.

And so it was not for her to feel fear of approaching the House of Dare. She had promised Colin the puppy: her grandfather had approved the gift. She was allowed to drive her ponies out when she wished it, with one of the coachmen beside her to aid and instruct as was necessary. But Uncle Alec had really taught her the management of her pretty pair. After all, she had driven her Shetland in the little tubby cart ever since she could hold the reins. It was not so very different driving two; except that the reins were heavier, and the ponies more frisky. But Mercy always talked to the creatures she managed, and they always responded to her voice and her pretty caressing words.

"I must go soon," she said to herself, "because I am getting so fond of Private Muggs, and he begins to love me too. And I want Colin to be his first friend really. Yes, he's a darling, and he knows how to follow, and to run after things beautifully. I do believe I'll take him to the House of Dare to-morrow."

CHAPTER VI

TO THE RESCUE

THE grandparents had no objection. Coachman must drive the ponies, as the road to the House of Dare was rough. But this arrangement suited Mercy, who would have her hands full with the care of the strong and restless puppy dog.

"If you like, my dear, you may bring the little boy home with you, if Captain Dare will spare him. If you go in the morning, you would have several hours here afterwards, and Bridle should drive him back after tea. The poor little boy must be lonely sometimes, without playmates in that lonely house."

"Oh, thank you, gwanny dear; I should love to bring him back. I think he is a nice little boy, and I'm not quite sure if he is happy. I *fink* he is rather frightened of Captain Dare."

"Think, my dear, not fink," spoke Lady Sarah, with gentle firmness. "Try to say granny clearly and distinctly, as you can if you try. A little girl who has passed her seventh birthday ought to speak quite plainly, without any lisping."

"Yes, granny, I do try. Only sometimes I forget."

"Exactly, my dear: it is easier to try by fits and starts than to keep up a high level of endeavour. But it is only by a steadfast perseverance which aims at never forgetting that the world's victories and achievements are wrought."

The child looked up in silent admiration at the stately face of the speaker. She did not try to reply; but somewhere in the depths of her being she was registering a resolve to combat that quality of forgetfulness which was at the root of quite a number of her childish peccadilloes.

To bring Colin back with her! That was an idea cer-

40 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

tainly. Suppose, instead of taking Private Muggs with her in the carriage, she only went to fetch Colin to introduce him here, and then carry him away? Really that might be the best. Grandmother thought so too. Captain Dare would be sure to let Colin go; and Private Muggs would show off to greater advantage when in his own surroundings. Also when carried away by the little boy, and finding himself in a strange place, he would depend entirely upon Colin, and attach himself firmly and faithfully to him.

So Mercy drove away in great spirits on the morrow, the ponies trotting out briskly, and Captain Muggs careering along beside the carriage in great style. The five miles were speedily traversed, and they drove through the big iron gates, upon the posts of which two great mailed fists appeared, each one holding a short keen blade, and beneath them the motto of the house: "I DARE."

But Mercy did not drive right up to the house. She halted the carriage at the place where the drive through the tangled park forked, one road leading to the entrance courtyard, the other to the stables and back regions.

She did not know her way; but she wished to avoid the formality of an arrival at the front door. She felt sure that Colin would be out in the garden this lovely morning. She would go and seek him there.

Yes—those were voices—she was sure of it. As she tripped onwards with Captain Muggs at her side she was increasingly sure of it. Voices in talk . . . in remonstrance . . . pleading . . . anger and woe! Mercy took to her heels and ran forward. Suddenly the thick shrubbery gave place to a square sunk lawn, with the line of the grim stone house beyond, that even the hot summer sunshine could not make to smile.

But Mercy had no time to look at anything, or to think of anything, for her eyes were arrested and chained by a sight of poignant horror. The air was filled with a tumult of sounds—the most piercing being the yelping cries of a dog, the whistle of a cruel whip, whilst the occasional gasping cry of a child and the stern, ringing commands of a man's

voice made a background of accompaniment, and Mercy heard the cold angry tones.

"Let go, you young fool! Do you hear me? You won't! Then take your chance! Serve you right! Let go, I say! You will have it then! It will only make it worse for the pair of you!"

That is what Mercy heard. What she saw was a tall, strong man, his dark face pale with anger, gripping by the collar the writhing form of a large pointer dog, round whose quivering body Colin had flung frantic arms, to cover him and save him from the cruel chastisement of that leather thong of the whip, which kept rising and falling with a merciless hiss.

The man was doing his best to avoid striking the child; but dog and child were so intermixed that it was impossible to avoid catching the clinging body of the small boy, or the small bare calves which showed weals and lines of red.

"You wicked, wicked, wicked man!"

Mercy shot forward, and like a little wild cat for activity and lissom agility she had sprung upon the tall man, and had gripped his rising arm between her two small hands, which felt to her in the stress and storm of this moment as though they had turned into bands of iron or steel.

"Cruel, cruel . . . wicked, wicked! . . . Oh, how can you, how can you? Oh, poor dog! Oh, poor Colin!" And as Captain Dare flung away the dog whip, and stood staring down at the excited child, his feet apart, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, Mercy turned from him with a look and gesture of unutterable loathing, and threw her arms round Colin, who had collapsed upon the ground to try and stifle his sobs, whilst Captain Muggs was standing beside his small mistress, his bristles all up down his spine, and his eyes gleaming red with anger and excitement. The pointer dog had vanished like a streak the moment the grip upon his collar was relaxed.

"Colin, poor Colin, I've come to take care of you! Oh, don't cry any more. I've come to take you home with me. Grandmamma said so—to spend the day: and I'll ask her when I get back to let you stay always with me. I'll

42 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

tell her about this wicked man . . . you shall show her your poor little legs ! " Mercy rose to her feet then, and with all the dignity of the heiress of Quentin Easter she spoke to Captain Dare, who still stood in exactly the same attitude, looking down upon the two children, with the dog mounting guard over them.

" You are a very cruel, wicked man, and I am going to take Colin away. You do not deserve to have a little boy to take care of. My grandfather is a magistrate ; and when people are wicked and cruel he sends them to prison. I wish he would send you. You deserve it. I understand now why Colin was not sure whether he wanted a puppy of his own. He thought you would be cruel to it, you cruel man. I thought only cowards were cruel like that. And I did not believe a Dare would be a coward."

" So you have a puppy for the little chap, eh ? "

" Yes ; a puppy who will be very like Captain Muggs when he grows up. He is called Private Muggs ; and he is for Colin. I am going to take him home with me. I meant him to bring Private Muggs back with him. But I'm not sure that we shall let Colin come back. I shall ask my grandfather about that first."

Then the big man went off into an explosion of laughter. This displeased Mercy, who did not see anything at all to laugh at ; but it seemed to give Colin confidence. He rose slowly to his feet, wiped the traces of tears from his face, and put an arm round the neck of Captain Muggs, whom Captain Dare was surveying critically.

" That's a good dog, though he is a mongrel. Yes, Colin, my man, you may bring the puppy back with you, and we'll teach him to be a smart ratter here at Dare."

" I won't have you teach him anything," Mercy flared up. " You are too cruel to have anything alive belonging to you. I won't let you have the puppy to treat as you treated that poor dog ! "

When Mercy shook back her curls, and held up her head, whilst her eyes flashed and her usually dreamy little face was all in a glow, she looked remarkably handsome, with an air of high courage and high breeding about her that made

instant appeal to all that was best in the nature of the stern, fierce, but not entirely hardened man.

Suddenly he shot out a large bronzed hand and took both of Mercy's small ones into its clasp.

"Then let us make a compact; and you may take it from me that the word of a Dare is his bond. If you send along that puppy, Colin shall have the little beggar for a companion and playfellow, and I'll not lay a hand upon him."

"Nor upon Colin either," insisted Mercy.

"Colin only felt the weight of my hand because he wanted to interfere. That is what I do not allow. I train my own dogs my own way, and that is my last word on that subject. But the boy is safe enough if he doesn't play the fool; and the puppy shall be immune for the sake of the fair lady who bestows it. And now be off, the pair of you, if you want! Give my respects to Lady Sarah Quentin, and tell her I will do myself the honour to drive over late in the afternoon and fetch this youngster home—and his puppy dog with him. Off you go, the lot of you!" And without another word or look, Captain Dare stalked off into the dark shrubberies which surrounded the house of Dare.

Colin's straw hat was lying on the grass. Mercy gave it him, and smoothed down his tumbled raiment with motherly touches.

Then hand in hand they ran towards the carriage, afraid lest the ogre of the place might change his mind and recall his victim. Only when they were bowling along the road outside the gates of Dare did the colour begin to come back into Colin's face, or the anxious fear to die out of his eyes.

"What did he do it for, Colin?"

"Because he's a beast!" flashed the small boy. "He's angry because one of the brace of shooting dogs he bought is gun-shy. He was cheated, he says, but he can't prove it. It makes him furious. He took them out rabbiting early this morning, and Ponto rushed away and tore indoors, and I hid him under the sofa. Cousin Rolfe was in a black rage all breakfast-time. He kept his whip close by his hand. I wanted him to go out; but he sort of knew

44 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

that Ponto was hiding indoors, and presently he saw him. Then he dragged him out. He dragged him to the lawn, and oh! how he beat him. I couldn't bear it. I'd rather be beaten myself. And then you came. Oh, how I hate him! How I hate him!"

"Is he never kind to you, Colin?"

"Oh yes, often. But when he's angry he's"—the child dropped his voice and added in a whisper—"just a devil."

But in the joy of Mercy's sympathy and friendship, and in the ecstasy of possessing Private Muggs all for his own, Colin's troubles were speedily forgotten.

Mercy told her tale to her grandparents, who listened gravely, and who looked at the weals upon little Colin's calves, but spoke never a word.

The children had a golden day together, and Mercy soon discovered that Colin had a high courage of his own, albeit the nervous high-strung strain would crop out unexpectedly at unforeseen moments.

When the dark-faced kinsman appeared to claim him, after having been indoors with the grandparents for some while first, Colin's face changed slightly, but he ran forward bravely with the puppy at his heels:

"Cousin Rolfe—this is Private Muggs; and he's my very own. Mercy says so."

"All right, youngster; looks a sharp little chap. Now, come along, for Lucifer isn't partial to standing."

Then he held out his big strong hand to the small girl who was gravely eyeing him, and said, with a laugh:

"Good-bye, little lady: and remember with satisfaction the words of the Psalmist: 'Mercy hath prevailed over judgment.'"

With his big rolling laugh he swung away, Colin holding by his hand and running to keep up, whilst the puppy, whom he had upon a lead, gambolled by his side.

Mercy stood quite still till they had disappeared. She was pondering very seriously in her heart some questions anent the qualities of cowardice, cruelty and courage.

CHAPTER VII

WIDENING HORIZONS

FRIENDSHIP with little Colin Dare marked an epoch in Mercy's life.

Hitherto, although little boys had come and gone, played with her, teased her, courted her or tyrannised over her as the case might be, these had generally been small cousins whom she had known all her life; and all of them came from nurseries much on the same pattern as her own. Their experiences ran on similar lines to hers, and she was friendly with them without any stirrings of that sense of romantic interest which awakens in some natures at a very early age.

But with Colin all was different. Colin had no nurse or nursery. An ex-soldier looked after him at home, and told him long exciting stories of fighting and adventure, which he duly passed on to Mercy. He had a great bare barrack-like playroom in the House of Dare, and tools and rusty old weapons were his playthings; whilst for story-books there were big calf-bound volumes taken from the library shelves, in which he could find the account of more battles, shipwrecks or travels than Denis even had had part in; and the two would pore over them by the hour together.

Then it was in connection with her friendship with Colin, which at this stage of her development became a dominant factor, that Mercy came to have some bewildering perceptions concerning the admixture of good and evil in the same nature. She began dimly to apprehend that quality of duality—even of conflict—in the same personality which is the riddle and torment of so many human lives.

Her thoughts about Captain Dare after her first encounter with him were touched with the severity of a child's judg-

46 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

ment, where half-shades are unknown. The blacks on the board are all black, and the whites are very white indeed. And the man who could be so cruel and wicked to his own dog and his little child-cousin was nothing more or less than a monster of wickedness.

Thus the very next experience she had of this wicked man came with a shock of surprise.

Colin rode over on his pony one day. This he had done once or twice before. He had to bring Private Muggs across to "report himself at headquarters" (this was what Denis called it), and he would stay and play with Mercy for many long happy hours. But on this day Denis had ridden with him. He came with a petition that Mercy might ride back with him, and spend the day at the House of Dare. He and Denis would take great care of her and bring her safely home. And Mercy was suffered to go, Captain Muggs, of course, in close attendance.

Colin was immensely proud of his charge, and played the little cavalier with real grace and charm. He rode beautifully, like one who has been cradled on horseback. Private Muggs had learned to cling fast across the pony's neck, save when he was put down to gambol at his heels when the pace was leisurely. To-day his joy was to fasten his teeth well in the neck and jowl of his sire, and hang on to him like grim death, as the big dog trotted soberly and with infinite good temper at the heels of the ponies.

"Captain Muggs is such a darling!" Mercy would say from time to time. "I wonder if he knows that Private Muggs is his own little boy—coachman says he is."

The House of Dare seemed less grim to-day, Mercy thought. Something in the mellow glory of the September day, the colour of the woods about it, the ruddy glow of the great tangled orchard behind effected a softening transformation. Mercy's gaze travelled along its grey frontal, as the children turned aside towards the stableyard to the north. A great baying of hounds heralded their approach and a number of sporting dogs leaped up and down in large wired yards, a few who were loose coming tumbling out to welcome the riders and challenge Captain Muggs. But Colin and

Denis both had them well in hand, and nothing more than a little amiable sparring ensued before the children left the yard with some half-dozen four-footed canine attendants following in their wake.

"Come and see my squirrel," quoth Colin; "three days ago he was nearly dead. I found him in the wood—he was alive, but too weak to run away. I picked him up, and he was just skin and bone. He was nearly starved—and I couldn't think why with all the nuts and things on the trees. So I took him to Cousin Rolfe. And he saw directly. Mercy, do you know about squirrels and the animals that are called rodents?"

"What, Colin?"

"Why, that their teeth are always growing, growing, growing—because you see they live by nibbling; and that would wear them away if they were like ours. So they grow on and on always. But if a rodent loses a tooth from an accident or anything, the opposite tooth goes on growing and growing with nothing for it to bite against, till by and by the creature can't open its mouth or bite at all, and it just starves to death!"

"Oh, Colin—the poor little squirrel! What did you do?"

"It was Cousin Rolfe who did it. I took it to him to ask what was the matter; and he knew in a moment. He got out one of his cases with shining things in them—travellers have lots of queer things they take about. And he had Denis in to hold the squirrel, and he just whipped out the big long tooth that was doing all the harm. And then I had a cage got, and we gave him bread and milk—and oh! how hungry he was! He ate and ate, till Cousin Rolfe said he mustn't have any more. And then he went to sleep for ever such a time; and then he woke up and ate some more. And now he has nuts, though we give him soft food as well; and he's getting so jolly tame. Cousin Rolfe thinks I may as well keep him and tame him, as perhaps he won't be quite as well able to fend for himself now. But he's a jolly little beggar as ever you saw. And he'd just have starved to death if it hadn't been that there was somebody who knew what to do and how to do it!"

48 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

Mercy listened breathless to this tale, her big thoughtful eyes growing dreamy with wonder and perplexity.

"But, Colin, I thought Captain Dare was—was——"

The eyes of the children met in a glance of mutual comprehension and sympathy. Colin understood perfectly what Mercy had thought about his cousin—just such things as he himself had often thought, and with only too good cause.

"I know," he said slowly; "that's what is so queer. You never can tell."

Mercy had the squirrel in her hands now, and was gently stroking it. The little creature, tamed in the first place by hunger and misery, was wonderfully little afraid of the children. Mercy was entranced. She had never fondled a squirrel before. This one was still weak and thin, but "a perfect darling," and Denis had prophesied that in another week the little beggar would be "as cheeky as they're made—begorra!"

"If you would like him, you shall have him," said Colin to Mercy. "He would love you, I know; he's beginning to be fond of me."

For a moment Mercy's eyes sparkled. She loved pets, and the squirrel was sweet; but next moment she had caught a little wistful gleam in Colin's eyes, and she kissed the squirrel and gave him back into his owner's hands.

"I'd like best for you to have him, and for me to come and see him sometimes."

"Sure?" asked Colin, his eyes alight, but his will holding firm. "You gave me Private Muggs. I'd like to give you something that you would like—truly, I would."

"So you shall," said Mercy, with a grave sweetness which was one of the qualities which was making her friends already in many circles. And then she stopped suddenly, for both children heard a ringing tread along the flagged passage which led from the house to this outside block of buildings, where Private Muggs had his quarters together with some rabbits in hutches, a tame magpie, and now the convalescent squirrel.

"That's Cousin Rolfe," said Colin, his sensitive face

betraying at one and the same time a variety of emotions, one of which was certainly a nervous fear, albeit there was a shining as of welcome in his eyes. "He comes every day to look at my squirrel. Do you want to run away?"

"No," answered Mercy; but she knew exactly why Colin had put the question. If she had been alone in this echoing stone place and had heard Captain Dare coming, she would probably have turned to flee.

"Ha!" spoke the clear incisive tones of the dark-faced man, "so you have the little lady all safe and sound. Madam, your humble servant." His bow would not have disgraced a buck of Queen Anne's days. "The two captives of the House of Dare are brought face to face! Shall we find another cage for this ladybird, Colin; so that she does not fly away at her own sweet will?"

"Captain Muggs would get her out if we did," said Colin; and Mercy, who was used to the banter of grown-up uncles, did not feel afraid, although Captain Dare was a very different personage from any uncle of hers. But by this time he had the squirrel in his strong, big hands, and was examining its mouth and handling it in a fashion which Mercy instantly appreciated. And when his grasp relaxed, the small wild thing ran up his arm to his shoulder, and sat there perfectly fearless, looking down at the children with black beady eyes, as though pleased and proud of his lofty perch.

"Here, take the little brute. I have to go out," quoth the Captain, as he handed back his ex-patient. "He'll do all right now. I'll be back this afternoon in time to take little Miss Quentin home, and settle up about those lessons which you are going to take together, it seems."

The children looked at each other questioningly; but neither knew what these words meant. Only there stole over Colin's horizon a golden light of hope and joy.

"What did he mean?" asked the breathless boy.

"I don't know. I'm to have lessons soon with a lady who has come to live at the Home Farm, and who will come every day in the mornings to teach me. But I didn't know

50 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

that she would teach you too. Oh, Colin—wouldn't that be—delicious ? "

There was no need for Colin to speak. The loneliness of his present life was a kind of terror to him. The mystery of the man who dominated it added to this sensitive fear. He never knew in what mood his cousin would show himself. This was what he tried to explain to Mercy at intervals upon this golden day.

Every spot in the wild rambling garden spaces, or in the grim and ancient house of echoing stone passages and half-dismantled rooms seemed linked up with a story in which Rolfe Dare had played a part ; but so many different parts ! That was the puzzle of it.

Cruel and kind, harsh and good-humoured, relentless and sympathetic—it was all such a puzzle to Mercy.

" You never know ! " Those were the words which Colin kept repeating, and they seemed to sum up the situation entirely.

" But if I come to have lessons with you, I sha'n't mind anything he says or does—to me. And he's always nice to Private Muggs. He's teaching me how to train him and make him a good dog ; and now there's the squirrel. And he gave Ponto to Mr Earle—said he was just about the form for a parson's cur. So I'm not worried about him any more. Mercy, I think he likes you because you scolded him that day. That's the funny thing about him. He likes just the things you think will make him most angry. But then—you can never tell."

Truly the qualities of some natures were hard to be understood.

CHAPTER VIII

OPENING GATES

"GRANDMOTHER, if Colin does my lessons with Miss Berry with me, mayn't I do his with Mr Earle with him?"

The stately grandmother looked down upon the small petitioner with considering eyes.

"I intend that you shall begin Latin with Colin; but you are rather young, my love, to study Greek or algebra. Colin is nearly two years older—and a boy."

"Only a year and a half, granny; and sometimes"—she paused and an expression stole into the big reflective eyes which was increasingly often to be observed there as the child's development progressed—"sometimes I think that girls *think* more than boys. Granny, please let me learn Greek too. I'd love it!"

"Very well, my dear. If you wish it, you shall share Colin's lessons for one month; for a trial. During that month you must give your whole mind to your tasks, and see whether or not these are too advanced for you. At the end of that month I will speak with Mr Earle, and we will then decide whether or not you continue the Greek and algebra. Latin I intend that you shall learn. I began the study of that language upon my seventh birthday—by my own wish."

Mercy's eyes sparkled and glowed; but she made no protestation. Only deep down in her heart, in that portion of her being where the faculties of the will take their root, she registered a vow that this privilege once accorded should never be withdrawn. What Colin learned, she would learn. She would not be left behind. Nor was this resolve simply the outcome of a sense of emulation and the desire to show her equality with her boy comrade. It was rooted in some

52 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

uncomprehended desire for knowledge, which meant power, knowledge which should fit her for that place in life that dimly she knew she must one day seek to fill. Grandmother had told her more things of the Queen than her desire to be good. She had told how the hours of the royal child had been occupied, how she had studied, striven, toiled to fit herself for the great position which now she was filling with such splendid strength and wisdom. If one day should come a call to her to rule the small world of Quentin Easter, she was resolving that she would model her life upon one which was noble, great and beautiful. She must strive to attain those qualities which made for the happiness and welfare of those who some day might depend upon her rulings.

Talks with Colin had brought certain phases of life into greater prominence than before.

One day Colin had arrived for lessons looking white and shaken. Although in physique he was improving in the stronger airs and cool brisk breezes of England, yet he still showed some of the nervous fragility of the Indian-bred child. Mercy was keen to note when things were amiss with Colin.

"I don't know what it was yesterday—only everything I did was wrong—and everything I didn't, too! If it wasn't for Denis and Private Muggs—and coming here every day—I'd run away! I'd go to sea, or enlist or something! Oh, if I could only grow up quicker! Denis says it isn't my fault. It's just because a man feels like that to his heir. Mercy, did you know? Cousin Rolfe isn't exactly the master of Dare. I mean he's master now; but he can't sell it or give it away or leave it to anybody he likes. Denis told me that. Because if he went away and got killed or anything—like so many of the Dares have done—then everything would come to me; and I should be master of Dare! Mercy, did you know? I don't understand myself—not if Cousin Rolfe didn't want me to—because it all seems like his now."

"I've heard people talk," said Mercy gravely. "It's something to do with a hen's tail."

"A hen's tail?"

"Yes, that's what they say. I don't quite understand. There isn't any hen's tail on Quentin Easter—at least that's what I've heard nurse and Black say when they talk. If there had been, then p'raps Uncle Frank would have had it after grandpapa. But grandpapa has decided to give it to me—and Uncle Frank doesn't mind. I suppose at Dare there is a hen's tail."

"We haven't half as many hens as you have, Mercy."

"I know. I don't quite understand, because when our hens moult there must be no end of tails all over the place. But that's what they say. Colin, would you like to be the master of Dare?"

"I should like it for one thing."

"What's that?"

"Because, if Dare was mine, then one day when I was a man, I'd come and ask you to marry me, Mercy. For I love you a thousand times better than anybody in the world—and Private Muggs next, 'cause you gave him to me."

Mercy's reflective gaze dwelt on the sensitive, quivering face of the boy. Something in Mercy's grave trustfulness and simplicity was extremely restful to Colin.

"But what has having Dare got to do with you loving me?"

"Nothing; only that you will be very rich; and if I had nothing to offer you, I couldn't ask you to marry me."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I couldn't—I couldn't!" The boy flushed almost to tears. "Men don't do that sort of thing—only miserable, crawling fortune-hunters. Mercy, do you know what Cousin Rolfe said the other day? He said that when you grew a little older you would make hearts ache—and that he would like to marry you himself! When I heard him say that, I wanted to kill him! So then I knew."

"Colin," said Mercy gravely, "you mustn't tell to one person what you've heard another person say about them. Uncle Alec told me that. It's got something to do with honour; and honour is a very splendid thing. I sha'n't marry Captain Dare, Colin."

54 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"I knew you wouldn't! Oh, Mercy, promise!"

"I don't much think I shall marry anybody, Colin."

"Oh, Mercy—not even me—if I get rich or famous; a great general or explorer or something?"

"I don't think so, Colin. Hugh says he shall marry me, and so does Jack. And because of the hen's tail Jack will some day be Lord Dunmow and then Lord Parminster. He told me so himself, and nurse says the same. But I don't intend to marry him or any of them. I mean to stay as I am—and have lots of friends."

Colin's face cleared and an eager look came into his eyes.

"I'm one of your friends—say that I am, Mercy!"

"Of course you are," she answered instantly. "I call you the greatest friend I've got."

This child friendship and comradeship with Colin Dare did much to brighten Mercy's childhood, as also it brought to him the chief interest and happiness of his life.

The daily ride taken in all weathers helped to give fibre and strength to the supple, but somewhat fragile frame. Colin could not endure to miss his lessons. It was soon found that neither pouring rain nor the keenest winds, nor the smother of sleet or snow in the air kept him away from his daily appearance at Quentin Easter.

Mr Quentin and Lady Sarah approved this tenacity of purpose, and Mercy admired it exceedingly. There was no one at Dare to take solicitous care of the lonely child; and thus it came about that one day he arrived there not only drenched to the skin, but with chattering teeth, with fevered cheeks and a difficulty in breathing which instantly aroused Mercy's concern.

The end of the matter was that Colin was promptly popped into bed in a big supplementary nursery, next to Mercy's own, and she had the satisfaction—dashed of course with much pity and anxiety—of helping to nurse Colin through a sharp attack of pleurisy, and of having him for her constant companion during the inclement but delightful Christmas season, and the following weeks of early spring.

It was when Colin was just convalescent that the children discovered how charming a companion Mr Earle could be.

He and Ponto came daily ; and there were games which were lessons and lessons which were games. There were tales told by the entrancing light of blazing wood—tales of adventure upon the mission field, which Mercy decided was almost as exciting and full of thrilling episodes as any soldier stories she had ever heard.

Then Uncle Roddy came home from his ship—and he brought with him a smell of the sea, an atmosphere of salt breezes and lashing waves. He gave them geography lessons, and taught them the use of queer instruments which he carried in his "kit." He knew all the stars as one knows the faces of friends, and taught the children to know them too.

Mercy felt as though every day fresh doors were being flung open wide before them. There was so much to learn ! How would there ever be time to learn it all ? And which out of all these entrancing things should she choose to master herself ?

"A Jack of all trades is a master of none," Uncle Roddy told her. "A smattering of everything is good in its way ; but after you've smattered a bit, then comes the time to choose. And when you've chosen, put your shoulder to the wheel and push along for all you're worth ! No shirking, no fooling, no looking back. Make your choice—and stick to it ! Once you've got your grip, never lose hold ! Take Captain Muggs for an example ! Perseverance is the quality the world lacks more than any other in these *fin-de-siècle* days. A man wants to be master before he's learned his rudiments. And because he can't get to the top of the tree without climbing, he sits at the bottom and howls for the days when liberty, equality and fraternity shall drag all the rest of the climbers, who have got up, down to the bottom to be equal with him ! That's about the truth of the modern gospel, ain't it, Earle ? And we'll see some queer developments in the same direction, as the world jogs along its way."

Captain Dare came over in these days rather often, ostensibly to see Colin, but in reality because the society of the sailor uncle was congenial to him, and the cheery

56 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

atmosphere of Quentin Easter a pleasant change from the grim, echoing gloom of the House of Dare.

At this time the big old banqueting-hall of the ancient wing beneath their nurseries was made over to the children for their playroom and study. It was large enough for both, and two big fires of logs blazed up the wide chimneys.

Here the men would forgather, as the dusk fell, several times in the week. A romp with the children would be followed by what fascinated Mercy almost more, a discussion, dispute, argument or "crack" between the men rather oddly thrown together.

The clergyman would stride up and down with measured steps, saying least, but throwing in words from time to time which struck like flint upon steel, seeming to produce a scintillating flash. The sailor had as a rule the most to say, and he and Dare would hold the lists in a wordy warfare which the children were far from comprehending, yet which fascinated them to an extraordinary degree.

"They make you see things," Mercy said, not knowing how else to express it.

"The odd thing is," Colin would remark, "that what one of them says seems right, till the other one says something different, and then he seems right and the other wrong. How can anyone tell? It's so awfully queer!"

"That's what grandmother calls the two sides of the shield," said Mercy, gravely ruminant. "There are always two sides; but some people only see one"—she paused and added with a soft determination, "I mean to learn how to see both."

BOOK II

GIRLHOOD

CHAPTER IX

CHANGES

AFTER two years of constant companionship with Colin Dare, he passed suddenly out of Mercy's life in that strange and inexplicable fashion which is one of the perplexities and even the terrors of childhood.

School had always loomed up before them as a necessary element in a boy's life. Colin indeed began presently to speak of it with open interest and curiosity. But then this was school with frequent holidays to be spent at Dare, in close communication with Mercy. Perhaps some holidays would even be passed at Quentin Easter, and the idea of a sudden and indefinite parting had never occurred to either child as possible, till suddenly it came upon them with the violence of a cataclysm.

As suddenly as he had come to his old grim house, Captain Dare shut it up and quitted it. The roving spirit of his race came upon him. In one week's time he had settled everything. He went away—and he took Colin with him.

A broken-hearted little boy, too proud to cry, but with despair in his eyes, came to bring the news to Mercy, and to leave in her care Private Muggs and the tame squirrel.

"He is going to sell my pony and his horses; and he doesn't know when he will come back. But Private Muggs and Whisk belong to me. I've brought them for you, Mercy."

Mercy was speechless and aghast. She clung to Colin's hand, her eyes brimming with tears.

58 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"He's going straight off to America—to the Rockies—to shoot grizzlies. He's going to leave me at some school in Canada or the States. He says England is played out. Perhaps he will never come back."

"But you will come back, Colin?"

"Yes, when I'm a man, I will. But Private Muggs will be dead by that time—and you'll be married to somebody else."

"No, I sha'n't, Colin. And I don't think Private Muggs will be dead either. I'll take care of him for you, and Whisk too. And if you'll write to me, and tell me where you are, I'll write back to you, and tell you all about everything."

That thought cheered them both for the moment; but the shadow of parting lay dark across their path. Colin came every day through that week of bustle and excitement; and the parting at the last with Private Muggs and Mercy was a hard one. It left its mark upon the little girl, and it added a year's compressed experience to the boy's life. One day they were together—the next a black curtain had dropped between them. The mystery of life, its possibility of tragedy sudden and inevitable got a grip upon Mercy's spirit and left its mark there. She began to ask why? of life, and for the moment she received no answer.

The House of Dare was shut up. She and Captain and Private Muggs often rode that way, the young one confident that he would find his master there sooner or later, Mercy conscious of a little wistful glimmering of hope, which was never confirmed.

She had known that Captain Dare was not the same sort of captain as her Uncle Alec. He was not in the regular army. He had been in the Yeomanry in his young life, and had served and won a commission (of some sort) in irregular warfare in far-off lands. Uncle Alec had once called him "a free-lance," which sounded romantic in the child's ears. It seemed as though this untrammelled freedom was one of the necessary elements of his being. "You'll never tame a Dare—rolling stones, every one of them," such had been words heard by Mercy long ago.

They seemed to have verified themselves now—and the House of Dare stood grim and empty again, as the child had known it in the bygone years.

Three letters came from Colin; one written on ship-board; one from Niagara, the last from some place the name of which defied all efforts to decipher. Then darkness swallowed him up, and he disappeared out of Mercy's life, as suddenly as he had come into it.

The patience of childhood was largely developed in Mercy. Childhood may be impatient of trifles; but is possessed of an immense capacity of resignation and patient endurance of heavier burdens—burdens which are little realised by even kindly elders, because the power of expression is denied to the child.

Mercy seldom spoke of Colin; but often her pillow was wet with tears. Private Muggs became as much her shadow as the father he so closely resembled; for he understood, and missed his master; and the mystery of the sudden departure and enveloping silence pressed upon them both almost in the same degree.

Nevertheless Mercy's life was a busy and happy one. Her lessons continued as before; and she made great progress in her studies. She had her rides and her games; her little cousins paid her visits at frequent intervals; and though she never ceased to think of Colin and to wonder where he was and what he was doing, time dimmed the first poignant sense of loss and regret; and that in itself was enough to set Mercy thinking afresh.

"The kid thinks too much," spoke Uncle Alec, when next he appeared on long leave when Mercy was nearly ten years old. "Send her along to Grace, mother, to spar and squabble with Gem. Grace tries to bring him up without spoiling; but with an only child, and delicate at that, it's almost impossible. He and Mercy would do each other lots of good; and they could be here part of the time too. Gem wants to knock about in the country. He's too much the little London drawing-room mummy's darling!"

Before Uncle Alec left two things had happened which tended to change Mercy's routine of life and to develop her

60 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

uncle's suggestion. Miss Berry left the Home Farm to be married and go out to Australia; and Mr Earle took an army chaplaincy and went off to India with the soldiers he was to shepherd.

Then began for Mercy a series of new experiences which were interesting but a little unsettling.

She went for three months in turn to each of the married aunts, to share the nursery life and the lessons of her little cousins, whom hitherto she had only known through their visits to Queen's Head.

Aunt Hilda's house was in the next county and quite near to the sea. Sir Robert's property ran down to the shore, and included what Hugh was fond of describing as "foreshore rights." The sea was something new and strange to Mercy; and Hugh delighted to exploit it for her benefit, and to show off his prowess in boating and bathing. He was an expert swimmer for his years; and after Mercy had been duly equipped with a suitable dress, he gave her lessons in this accomplishment, and was mightily pleased and proud of her prowess and fearlessness in the water, and the ease with which she responded to his instructions.

The sensation of being lifted up and sustained by the warm, strong salt water was a pure delight to Mercy. Swimming was like flying—it seemed to lift you up above the earth, and endow you with a whole set of new sensations and emotions. The little ones, Dick and Babe, splashed about and paddled and swam much after the fashion of ducks and puppies. But Mercy loved to strike out and reach some distant rock and, climbing out upon it, sit there basking in the sun, her feet dipping into the warm green water which swayed the heavy dank seaweed and sucked and gurgled round her, thinking her thoughts and dreaming her dreams (about which she never spoke), whilst Hugh swam and frolicked with the two brindled dogs, who had become almost as amphibious as the big schoolboy himself.

Of course Hugh was now at school, but Mercy's visit had been planned to include the whole of his summer holiday; and she had holiday too, and grew brown with the kisses of the sea and the wind, and with the hot sunshine which

seemed yellower and fiercer than it did at home, where there were always trees everywhere to fling a soft green shade.

Hugh would sometimes try to get her to say which she liked best—Quentin Easter with its woodlands, or Leigh Priory with its river and fishponds and the wide tumbling sea to the south, laughing in the brave golden sunshine.

But Mercy was beginning to apprehend more than ever the existence in every phase of life of the two sides of the shield. She loved them both, she would answer—just as she loved each flower that bloomed in its season. To her unfolding child's mind there was something crude and unkind in comparisons. Each was best and right in its own place; each flower in its own season. To say you liked one better than the other implied a slur upon the one not preferred. She tried to make Hugh see this.

"It's like Captain and Private Muggs—I love them both. Captain Muggs is my very, very own; and I've had him for years, and he is a darling. But then Private Muggs has lost his own master, and I had to comfort him; and I am keeping him till Colin comes back. And he is a darling too. I love them both—each just as well as the other—only in a different way. It's like that with all the things you love. It isn't more or less—it's just—different."

When Hugh went back to school and the summer waned to autumn, Mercy was sent to London for three months, to do lessons with little Gem, who was a year her junior, but pronounced to be a very clever child.

Here Mercy encountered quite a new set of experiences, and for the first time in her life was separated from Captain Muggs, who with his son was sent back to Quentin Easter; Mercy being told that both the dogs would be very unhappy in London, and that she would herself be going home for Christmas, where she would find them all safe and sound.

Aunt Grace had a big house in a London square, and the most homelike thing about it to Mercy was the frequent visits of Uncle Frank, who was now a Q.C., very busy and growing celebrated; but who made time to pay frequent visits to the little niece thrown for the first time into the whirl and bustle of big London.

62 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

After one bad bout of home-sickness, Mercy began to find things quite interesting here. Gem was a queer little boy, very fond of sums and of mechanical toys, but somewhat deficient in imagination, and not quite sure that he approved of this interloper into his life of experiment and research.

But Mercy entered with zest into his pursuits. Gem was going to be a great inventor, he told her, and was always inventing things now. He pulled all his mechanical toys to pieces and put them together again, to Mercy's immense admiration and delight, till she began to learn how it was done, and emulate some of his feats. That dexterity of finger which she possessed in large measure awoke Gem's admiration and envy and sealed their friendship. Also Mercy had so many ideas for things which wanted inventing—a machine for washing dogs without their having to be sent to the stables, a machine for sucking up the leaves from flower-beds without knocking the flowers about with a rake or a broom—a machine for waking up in the morning when you wanted to go out ever so early without telling anybody about it. . . . In fact, Mercy had some new suggestion for a machine almost every day of the week ; and what with thinking how all these were to be made, and going about to see the sights of London, sometimes with the governess or Aunt Grace, sometimes (which was a vast treat) with Uncle Frank in his private hansom cab, the days and weeks slipped away so fast that Christmas came round almost before Mercy was ready for it ; and Gem hugged her at parting with quite a bearlike embrace, begging her to come back before long ; and promising to invent some very superior machine by the time they met again.

CHAPTER X

MOTHER MERCY

BUT Mercy was not destined to see London again for many a long year. In February she went to stay with her youngest and prettiest aunt—"Auntie May," as the little maid called her; and at Mrs Russell's pretty country house—prettier and cosier than any such place that Mercy had seen before—were that delightful pair of twins whom Mercy had entertained in her own nurseries on the occasion of her seventh birthday, and who had grown into a pair of delightful, roguish, mischievous, cuddly little people, who awoke in the heart of the girl-child, who came to be so much with them, stirrings of inexplicable feeling which found no vent in words, but which resulted in the nickname that the five-year-old twins soon began to bestow upon her—the name of "Mother Mercy."

And Mercy loved the sound of it. She was never tired of the company of these frolicking creatures, who were superior to puppies or kittens in so many respects, and drove dolls (never any supreme joy to Mercy) out of the field altogether.

At this time Auntie May was very much occupied. She and Uncle Tom had constantly to run up to London and stay with Aunt Grace, whose husband was a Member of Parliament and a great personage in the eyes of the family.

In the absence of the real "mummy," Mercy played her part of "mother" with great delight and enthusiasm. She had lessons to learn, of course. The bright little daily governess, who taught rudiments and kindergarten lore to the twins, gave Mercy quite interesting lessons in history, geography and English; though she did not attempt the Latin or Greek in which Mercy had made much progress

64 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

whilst with Gem. But Mercy loved to write compositions at this stage of her development, and learn to set her ideas in order that she might find words in which to express them. She told stories of entrancing interest to the twins, who clamoured to have them put into a book—a real book, with print and pictures. The print was beyond Mercy's powers, but she began to try and draw little pictures to illustrate her stories, and quickly discovered that the brush rather than the pen was her best exponent, and to her great delight, before she left for Leigh Priory, she had a dozen excellent drawing lessons from a lady artist who lived in the neighbourhood, and invited Mercy to come three afternoons a week to her studio.

Another summer by the sea had been settled upon for some while in advance, and sorry as Mercy was to say good-bye to the clinging, clamouring twins, she felt a great longing for the warm soft salt embrace of the sea; for the exquisite sensation of floating out into infinite space, for the voice of the gulls wheeling aloft, and the splash of the waves along the shore.

Uncle Tom's parting gift was a splendid paint-box, and Auntie May gave her a number of sketch-books and drawing blocks and some coloured chalks. At Leigh Priory she was to have holiday, and at the first Hugh had not arrived from school. Dick and Babs, grown older by a year, and arrived at the proud ages of seven and six respectively, were still all in all to one another, and though graciously willing for Mercy to join their games, were always content alone. So Mercy was able to betake herself to the shore almost any hour of the day that she pleased, take her bathe in the warm buoyant water, and then with her towel about her shoulders, and her clustering curls all matted and wet, exposed to the warm kisses of the sun, sit dreaming upon the rocks, weaving fantastic stories in her brain, and with eager fingers, which made rapid progress in skill, jot down in her book the face of a mermaiden, the wonders of her grotto home; or she would seek with bold washes of colour from her box to reproduce those glories of sea and sky which were a never-ending joy and poem to her.

Strange gaudy daubs these last were—yet a keen or a sympathetic eye might trace in them promise of powers still lying latent and undeveloped within. Her colour sense was strong and true. Colour affected her almost like a strain of music, weaving and working within her all kinds of shifting and exquisite imaginings to which she could fit no words. She loved this freedom of the shore, with her two brindled comrades as her protectors. She saw visions and she dreamed dreams; and if these vanished into the background of her being with the coming of Hugh, they had left the effect of their qualities upon the sensitive retina of the child's mind.

To romp on sea and land with Hugh, to be teased and courted, tyrannised over and adored, was good for Mercy at this stage of her existence. Hugh was bubbling over with boyish vitality, and charged up to the muzzle with school-boy stories and schoolboy pride.

Mercy was keenly appreciative of the first, and made a most admirable listener; her own sense of humour—sometimes scarcely enough developed in her surroundings—awaking responsive to the demand now made upon it; whilst the second aroused within her something of that amused tolerance which lies latent in the female mind in respect of the native arrogance of the male creature, and asserts itself in delicate little pin-pricks administered to the inflated balloon, which not unfrequently results in a rapid collapse and descent.

But for all this Hugh and Mercy were fast friends, and the bright hot August days flew by all too fast for them both. But great was the anger and disappointment of Hugh when suddenly the fiat went forth that Mercy was wanted at Quentin Easter nearly a month before the appointed time.

Mercy was astonished, for generally the plans made for her had been strictly adhered to. But Hugh snorted out his opinions in no measured terms.

"I know what it's all about. Those wretched twins of Aunt May's. Mother told her they might come here; but she said that grandmother had offered for them to be at Quentin Easter, and Aunt May chose that, because they

66 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

were so fond of you ! Hang it all ! I don't want you to go, Mercy. I call it all a horrid chouse ! ”

“ But why are the twins going to grandmamma ? ” asked Mercy.

“ Oh, because Uncle Tom's got some appointment in Egypt, and will be there for two or three years, and Aunt May has got to go with him, of course. I've heard them talking about it. And of course the kids can't go. But they might have waited till school began again. I think I might be considered too ! ”

But Master Hugh's remonstrances had no effect, save to obtain for him a promise that he should spend a few days at Quentin Easter with Mercy before he went back to Winchester. And as for Mercy, though she was always sorry to leave the sea and Hugh, and the delights of their morning swims together out to the sunken rocks, where the sun shone on the hot seaweed and the water sucked up and down and in and out, telling stories which she tried in vain to catch, still the thought that she was wanted at home—that pretty Auntie May and the darling twins needed her, was a great solace to her spirit. For Mercy was reaching forward from the realms of protected childhood into that wider arena, where she would have a part to play other than that of the child with ordered life, fenced and guarded upon all sides. Half eagerly, half shrinkingly, she was beginning to ponder upon the things which as yet were not ; and to play the part of “ little mother ” to Tot and Dot at Quentin Easter would be a sort of beginning to the life she knew was one day coming, when bewildering powers of rule would be placed in her hands.

The welcome of the twins was delightful. They had reached Mercy's nurseries two hours before her arrival, and they fell upon her with shouts of gladness.

A great surprise awaited Mercy also ; for if she found her nurseries invaded, and treasures other than her own laid out in the various shelves and cupboards, she found also that her convenience and her dignity had not been set aside.

Grandmother herself, with a smiling face and an air of

dignified mystery so dear to the heart of youth, led Mercy by the hand along the passage which connected the nurseries with the main block of the house, and opening a door into one of the sunny south chambers, she showed the enraptured little girl a charming room, freshly papered and painted, and hung with pictures, which caused Mercy to gasp with delight and wonder. There was a low bookcase on one side of the carved mantelpiece in which she saw all her own library ranged, and with these old friends whole shelves of new treasures, some brightly and some soberly bound, telling alike of work and play. There was a small writing-table with all needful appurtenances, and another table where she could find ample room for all her studies, games or drawings. There was a rocking-chair by the window, and both the window seats were wide and cushioned. There was a thick soft carpet on the floor, and through an open doorway she had glimpses into a dear little bedroom all pink and white—just such a room as she had always dreamed of having when she would grow up to young ladyhood.

"My dear child," said the stately grandmother, "these rooms have been made ready for you, a year or two earlier than I originally intended. But since your nurseries are wanted for the twins, it seems the best plan that you should have a place of your own for your independent use. You have been a careful and orderly child, and I think you will take care of the furniture and pictures and other things you find here. You will have lessons here when September comes, and the little ones will use your old schoolroom for theirs. I do not forbid either the children or the dogs from coming into your rooms at your wish; but when you desire to romp and be noisy, or when any of you come in with dirty feet or coats"—grandmother's eyes dropped as she spoke to the two brindled satellites of Mercy's who were snuffling round the room with great interest and waving tails—"then take to the nurseries or schoolroom and play there. For the rest, I hope that you will be very happy here, my love, and that as you grow into your girlhood, much useful work and profitable meditation may be carried on in this place."

68 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

The child put up her face for a kiss, speaking never a word. That was Mercy's way : she seldom spoke when she was deeply moved ; and Lady Sarah understood this very well.

Then Auntie May came rustling in, her hands full of flowers, which she dropped upon the table to take Mercy in her arms.

" You darling—my dear little Mother Mercy, I don't know how I ever could have left my babies if it had not been that dear grandmother offered them a home, and that there was little Mother Mercy there to take care of them ! When I had to tell them, and the first tears were dried, it was the news that they were going to be with Mother Mercy that brought the smiles and sunshine back. Be always their little mother, darling ; for they love you very much. But do not let them forget their own mummy far, far away ! Tell them about her every day. Give them her picture to kiss every morning and every night."

" Indeed, Auntie May, I will. And I will hear them their prayers too, and they shall always ask God to bring you safe back very soon. Oh, I will love to teach them all that, and to tell them about you every day ! "

So Mother Mercy bent all her will to this task, and in impressing upon the twins day by day and every day the importance of always keeping in mind their mother, however far away she might be, something was brought home to her own spirit of the mysterious power of the quality and fidelity of loyal love, together with a keener realisation of belief in " the things not seen " than generally makes its appeal to one so young.

Hugh's visit came and went with something of a rush and a scrimmage. It was a breathless time for Mercy, of mingled delight and anxiety ; for the twins desired to emulate his every feat, and kept Mother Mercy on tenterhooks all the while. Yet Hugh's breezy affection was dear to her, and his hug at parting remained with her long—like his words :

" Those kids are all very well, Mercy ; but mind, I come first. I'm the eldest of your cousins, and I'm going to marry you some day ; and don't you ever forget that—or there'll be the dickens to pay ! "

CHAPTER XI

MISS MARJORIBANKS

It was during the three years that Mercy had the twins to play mother to at Quentin Easter that she formed her first real friendship with a grown-up person : that kind of friendship so dear to the heart of girlhood, when the elder admits the younger woman to an equality and camaraderie which the gap in years does little to hinder, although it remains an integral fact which cannot be entirely set aside or forgotten.

Mercy was eleven when the twins came to Quentin Easter, and fourteen when they left to return to their parents who by that time were back in England. And it was midway between these two epochs that this thing befell Mercy, and that she made acquaintance, which rapidly developed into warm friendship, with Miss Marjoribanks, who lived in the Little Old House.

That was the local name for Quentin Cottage. And Quentin Cottage stood almost opposite the park gates on the village side, and was the first house you came to as you turned towards the village. The Rectory came next, then the church, and beyond that the sexton's house, the blacksmith's forge, and the picturesque straggling village street which only had one side to it, because the river ran along the valley on the other side of the road. There was a goose green a little farther on, with houses dotted round it, and then Quentin Easter village came to an end and only scattered farmsteads and isolated cottages for the labourers broke the sweep of woodland and field.

The Little Old House had been occupied through Mercy's childhood by a little old couple who had died within a few weeks of each other, whilst Mercy had been in London with

70 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

Gem. Then it stood empty for a while, being very quaint and old-fashioned, with low ceilings, panelled walls, and no "modern conveniences." Mr Quentin liked the old cottage as it was, and had no wish to renovate it according to new-fashioned ideas, caring little whether it was taken or not.

But after Mercy got back and had settled down to life with the twins, and with regular lessons from a governess who drove daily over from Market Quentin, she gradually became aware that the Little Old House was let, though it was some considerable time before she began to take any note of the inmates, or speculate at all about them. For the old lady was an invalid and almost blind and seldom came out of doors at all, and her daughter, whom Mercy heard spoken of as Miss Marjoribanks, was much occupied with her mother, and was not seen often abroad herself except at church.

Mercy became gradually familiar with the new face—a rosy face, rather round, with wide brow, dark eyes which glinted and sparkled, well-cut, decided features, and a mouth too wide for regular canons of beauty, but so full of possibilities of humour, geniality and generosity that no one was ever found to fall foul of its proportions. What chiefly fascinated Mercy, when she found it out, was that Miss Marjoribanks wore her hair short like a boy. It curled prettily, and was turning very grey, and the mixture of black and silver in the crisp curls framing the rosy face was both uncommon and picturesque.

And quite suddenly, one lovely May day, when Mercy was nearing her thirteenth birthday, the friendship began.

With her grandparents Mercy was beginning to try and exchange ideas. She brought them questions, and listened eagerly for the answers, which was always carefully and kindly given, explanatory but quite final. The stately dignity of her grandparents removed them very far above little Mercy's own world. Of course they knew everything. There was no disputing their dicta. Argument was out of the question: there was difficulty for Mercy even in putting her questions sometimes; for she felt that her own outlook was something so remote from theirs, so that they would

never understand. Just as in her woodland walks as a tiny child she saw thousands of things which the eyes of the grown-ups were much too high up to take cognisance of, so she felt it to be here, with her ideas and worlds of wondering thoughts. Big people could not see them; their vision was so far above her own. And then, quite by accident, she stumbled upon a friend whose age was no hindrance to understanding!

Mercy was taking some lessons at the Rectory, where the old Rector liked to supervise her Latin and Greek, finding her a very intelligent and eager little pupil. So Mercy passed the Little Old House very often, alone save for the dogs who attended her upon that very short distance between the lodge gates and the Rectory. Miss Marjoribanks was very often out in her garden, and she would nod and smile to Mercy as she went to and fro. Sometimes she would come to the gate and speak a few words, pat the dogs, or ask some question about the twins or the grandparents.

Thus a little everyday acquaintance was struck up, which did not promise to be anything specially interesting at the first, till something happened which all in a moment put it suddenly upon a quite new footing—and Mercy found herself plunged into the mysterious delights of a real friendship with a real grown-up.

It happened in the woods, where Mercy had gone forth to "make a picture." This making of pictures for the twins was one of the nursery delights, and Mercy had attained a remarkable facility for draughtsmanship of a certain sort. She was taking lessons also in the ordinary routine, of copying from the antique, and acquiring a certain technical knowledge as a sure foundation for future efforts. But none of these things satisfied the yearnings of her soul.

Colour was to Mercy what music is to many soaring spirits, and her lessons at present did not include any colour work, for which she was considered as yet too young. But the shimmer of gold-green crumpled leaves in the woods, the mist of blue above the banks where the wild hyacinths massed themselves together, the mosaic work of primrose and anemone, green moss and withered bracken^Yfern,

72 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

formed so entrancing a picture before Mercy's eyes that the need to try and dash upon paper something of the wonder and the glory was too strong to be resisted, and off she started for the woodlands, with only her four-footed comrades admitted to the secret of her ambitions. And here, in the loveliest of all lovely dells, with music overhead and a glow of beauty unspeakable about her, Mercy, grave and almost awed, set to the task of accomplishing her *magnum opus*.

Oh! that first hour of breathless wonder and endeavour, the mingling of colours, the pathetic attempt to portray what has never yet been conveyed to paper or canvas! The first wild hopes, to be followed by perplexity, doubt, disillusionment, and at last the terrible certainty that instead of a picture it is only a worthless daub, more like a "rainbow in convulsions" than any effect of woodland glory in the magic atmosphere of spring.

Mercy did not often cry. In moments of stress of feeling tears would well up into the big grey eyes; but they seldom fell. Bursts of weeping were very rare with her. From a child, as she had once told Mr Earle, she had been taught that to cry about trifles was foolish and naughty. But to-day, when, after an hour of enchantment and of hope, she suddenly saw her poor little daub as it would appear to other eyes, a sudden sense of unutterable discouragement and despair leaped upon her. She gazed and gazed at her paper, seeing every moment some fresh evidence of her utter impotence and lack of power or skill, till suddenly the welling of tears ran over, and all the world was a blurred confusion of dancing lights and colours before her; and she flung herself face downwards on the ground to shut out the dazzling beauties which she could never hope to portray, and quite unexpectedly her whole small frame was rent and torn by a storm of sobs.

How long she cried she did not know. Captain and Private Muggs were doing all they knew in their astonishment and dismay to get at the cause of her woe, and if possible to comfort her. Perhaps it was these endeavours on their part to attract her attention which prevented her

from hearing the sound of footsteps. Anyway, she had no idea that anybody was near, till suddenly sitting up, and throwing back the tangle of hair from her tear-stained face, she saw Miss Marjoribanks sitting upon her own discarded camp-stool with the dreadful daub in her hands, which she was studying attentively, looking from the paper to the lovely bluebell bank and the golden arch of trees in the glade, with an expression in her eyes which suddenly drew Mercy to her side.

"Oh, please don't look—it is too awful!"

"Not exactly that, Mercy. Only so very much too difficult for you to try yet. Very few of our greatest painters really succeed in giving us the spirit of the woodlands. But even this little daub shows one thing—that you see what there is to be seen, though you cannot get it down on the paper."

"Then how can you tell?" Mercy's eager little quivering face began to glow. "How do you know what I see?"

"I know it by the way you have tried after the effects—the blue of that bank with the flowers and their leaves, and the different blue above them all shot and mixed up with gold, as we see it shimmering like a mist just above. Perhaps there are only a dozen men living who could give us that gold-powdered blue mist; but then how many people are there who ever see it? And you have the arch of the trees very well given, to make a fairy frame; and you see that the young leaves, all crumpled and twinkling, are more yellow than green, with the sunlight glancing through them."

"Oh, Miss Marjoribanks—how *kind* you are! I was so miserable."

"So I saw, my child. I had to look about for a clue to the woe—and I found this. Then I understood."

Mercy coloured a little, looking shy.

"Indeed I don't often cry like that. I'm much too big. But for a whole week I had been coming here to sit and watch it all, and get *steeped* in it. And I thought that if I did that . . . And look there! Oh, it was awful! I feel as though I should never want to paint another picture in my life!"

74 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"That would be a great pity. But you must learn to choose your subjects with more regard to the limitations of your own skill and experience. You see, Mercy, I know; because I have been through it all myself. I thought I was going to be a great artist once, and take the world by storm. And I have found that I can only be a very little one; yet in my own small restricted field I find abundant pleasure, and as much occupation as I am able to afford for it."

"Oh, Miss Marjoribanks—do you paint? Oh, will you paint something for me now—this very minute! I would so love it!"

"Then get me that little bit of moss down there, with the red larch tuft upon it, and that little green caterpillar. Hold it for me in your hand, so, and see what you will see!"

The lady took a clean page of Mercy's sketching block; mixed her colours, took a pencil, and began.

Entranced and motionless, Mercy watched. First a few bold but delicate pencil strokes. Then several delicate washes of colour. Then out of the white paper grew the soft, damp, glistening mass of emerald moss. Light as thistledown upon its greenness lay the little crimson feathery tuft from the larch-tree overhead. An old year's brown oak-leaf had drifted here also, and was embraced by the growing moss, whilst upon the russet brown the transparent brilliance of the little green caterpillar seemed to shine like a jewel.

Mercy fairly gasped with amazement and entrancement.

"Oh, Miss Marjoribanks! How do you do it? How do you know? And out of my paint-box too! Such colours!"

"Your paint-box is a very good one, little girl; and my sketch is such a very little one—just a bit of moss—no more. If I were to try and paint all that . . . I should make a daub not much better than your own!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Mercy, and felt abased to the dust. Whereupon Miss Marjoribanks laughed and kissed her and said:

"Come in and see me some day when your grandmother approves, and you shall see my drawings, and we will have some tea and talk."

CHAPTER XII

REAL OLD MAIDS

THAT had been Miss Marjoribanks' word on the first occasion when she and Mercy took tea together under the weeping willow which graced the lawn of the Little Old House on the side away from the road.

Through the months which followed, whilst Mercy was eagerly prosecuting her studies in flower-drawing, and exploiting the delights of her first friendship with a grown-up person, it was her greatest delight to be put in charge of the old Queen Anne tea-pot, the richly embossed cream-jug (with a long history all its own) and the transparent egg-shell china, which looked as though the fairies had surely manufactured it with deft and loving hands, and as she poured out the tea, and supplied with pretty eagerness the wants of her companion and *de facto* hostess, she would look across with an arch smile dashed with appeal to ask :

"Miss Marjorie—isn't this being real old maids?"

"Miss Marjorie," was the tentatively spoken caressing name which Mercy had bestowed upon her friend after some length of time, when she had mastered the mysterious spelling of Marjoribanks. The Little Old House was very dear to her. So were her lessons from her friend, who made them surpassingly interesting by her quick comprehension of those things which Mercy saw in her models, but which she had not the skill to depict, and yet more of those suggestive thoughts and fantastic dreams which these same models inspired, and which gave to bud or leaf or blossom an individuality and evanescent personality which made it for the moment as a living entity.

For Miss Marjorie had been in fairyland herself, and she remembered what it was like! She could wander there

76 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

with Mercy yet ; and oh ! the joys of those long sunny summer rambles in the whispering woodlands, or through glowing meadows, or along the banks of the laughing, talkative stream ! When they sat down to listen to that never-ceasing voice, Miss Marjorie would interpret it for the benefit of the happy little maiden, who loved to lie along the hot dry grass, her curly head upon the lap of her friend, drinking in the sound of her words, and sometimes looking up with question, comment or corollary to the delicately woven fabric of the fairy fantasy.

Almost as charming were the lessons in flower-painting, which her grandparents arranged that Mercy should take from Miss Marjoribanks, though she did not as a rule instruct pupils. But in her way she was a professional, and did work in her own special line for many leading publishing houses. Mercy was never weary of looking through her beautiful drawings of flowers, each flower set against a coloured background which showed it up with a delicate and vivid individuality that seemed the hall-mark of this artist's work.

There would be a deep purple iris with, perhaps, a delicate mauve companion, against a background of liquid amber fading to pale lemon. Or a pure white Christmas rose with a background like the flush of a sunset sky. A stately arum would lift its cup against a background of fairy green ; and a spray of apple-blossom fling itself athwart an azure which suggested the radiance of an Italian sky.

It was the luminous properties of these backgrounds as much as the exquisite rendering of nature's colours in the flowers which had given distinction and recognition to the work of Miss Marjoribanks ; and there was nothing which Mercy so greatly enjoyed or appreciated as to be taken a little behind the scenes of her dear and admired friend's life, which not unfrequently happened when they sat together over their " old maids' tea."

" Of course, Mercy, when we are young we want to do a great many things, and if we feel the stirrings of some particular gift or talent, we have an idea that one day we may take the world by storm—though we do not often con-

less as much. Then as we grow in experience, and begin to understand something of the limitations of life and of our own energies and progress, we have to make a choice : shall we try to do a great many things indifferently, or to do a few—perhaps only one thing—really well ? ”

“ And give up all the rest ? ”

“ Ah, that is the hard part—the thought of giving up. Until we come to learn that we do not altogether give them up ; for others carry them on to perfection, and we watch and in measure enter into their labours and share their triumphs, and rejoice because the sum of the world’s possessions and glories is enriched by these very things which we ourselves have not been able to accomplish, but which have been done in spite of that—and we have our share in the triumph.”

Then Mercy felt some wonderful glow in the region of her heart, which always came to her with the kindling of a new and big idea ; and the shining of the child eyes seemed to beg of the speaker to continue the explanation.

“ You know how proud and pleased you are when the twins achieve something by themselves in which you have had no share.”

“ Yes, yes ; but they belong to me.”

“ Ah, there you touch the kernel of the whole matter ! In another great big wonderful way we all belong to one another. Whether we take the beautiful Christian ideal of membership in one Body—the Body of Christ—or whether we take that other ideal of the brotherhood of mankind under the headship of the Great Father and Creator, still the same thought holds good. We all belong to one another, and we ought all to work for the common good ; and to do with all our might that thing which we set before us as our share in the world’s work, without grudging to any their own larger share, but rejoicing in it and being proud of their success, that is what will help, that is what will tell.”

“ But, but—yes I see that—it is beautiful. Only ought we not to try and do as much as we can—the more the better ? ”

78 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"Certainly, so long as we can do it well. But it is not given to a great many of us to be able to do really well more than a limited amount of work in whatever field we may be set to labour. And the time comes to each one of us when we have to realise our limitations, and settle whether we will specialise over one or two things wherein we hope to succeed, or whether we prefer to spread our energies over a wider area of endeavour, with the danger and drawback of finding that we are undertaking more than we can accomplish, and are failing to make a real mark anywhere."

Mercy's chin rested on her clasped hands; her face was intently watchful of that other face with the bright dark eyes, the mobile lips and the ever-changing play of expression which gave such force and charm to her words.

"I will tell you about myself, Mercy. I have told you that I hoped once to be a great painter, and to accomplish great things. I lived then in a big old house instead of a little one; and I never thought it would matter to me whether I made any money or not. Friends were encouraging and flattering, and I had my dreams of doing wonderful things, until one day a very dear and wise old friend, who has long since gone to his rest, told me quite plainly and quite kindly that I was trying after more than I had skill or power to accomplish. And he made me see it. There lay his skill. And though it came as a shock and disappointment to me, he would not let me give up. He showed me where I was strong, as well as where I was weak. Colouring and atmospheric effects; those were my strong points, and draughtsmanship of a kind. And so I specialised upon flowers, and my gift for atmosphere found its objective in my backgrounds. When I felt that here was a field where I could really excel—Mercy, it was like drinking fairy nectar out of fairy goblets! I had found my work! I love it more every year. I know that I do it well. Before the change came which sent us into this Little Old House, my work had found a market. When a great deal of our money took to itself wings, it meant very much to me to have this professional work which I love and which is remunerative also. If I had gone on painting great land-

scapes and faulty subject pictures, which was my first ambition, I should probably have been able to make nothing by these. You can see what it has been in my life to learn how to give up great ambitions for which I was not fitted, and be content with a very small corner to work in—where I can succeed in doing the work well."

And Mercy grasped and laid away this lesson side by side with so many others, to be ruminated over and pondered about after the fashion of thoughtful childhood, struggling towards a more developed maidenhood, which already looms above the widening horizon.

The Little Old House was dear to Mercy. She loved the gentle and half-blind old lady, who lay upon her couch, with some delicate mesh of silken work in her hands, some times in her own upstairs rooms, more occasionally downstairs beside sunny window or blazing hearth. She, too, had stores of information and anecdote with which to amuse and interest her frequent little girl guest. And Mercy came often with book or paper to read a while to her, and the old lady would tell her such interesting and illuminating stories, linking up the present with the past, that at last it dawned upon Mercy that she might even be living herself in historic times, and that all she read of the historic past was finding a sequel and corollary in the present, which in its turn would find its way to the page of story or romance, and live in these for the delectation of children yet to be born.

Another interesting discovery which Mercy made in time was that Mr Earle, whose image was getting a little dim and blurred in her mind now, was a kinsman of the Marjoribanks, and that it was letters they had received from him whilst he was Dr Ringer's curate which had turned their thoughts towards Quentin Easter, when they had to leave the dear old home of which Mrs Marjoribanks loved to talk, and about which Mercy was never tired of listening.

Over one of the old-maid teas beside the fire in the pleasant autumn afternoons, Mercy would tell Miss Marjorie about her friendship with Mr Earle, and how he once gave lessons to her and to Colin. She had driven her friend more than once to see the House of Dare standing grim

80 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

and empty and desolate ; and it was very interesting to hear that years before Miss Marjorie had been told in letters of a certain little girl and boy to whom " Arnold " was teaching the rudiments of Latin and Greek.

" It seems too funny," she confessed. " It makes me begin to understand what people mean when they say that the world is a small place. For really it is very, very big ! "

They laughed together like friends and comrades over some of the reminiscences which they shared together. Mercy told how she had betrayed to Arnold Earle (she thought Arnold a beautiful name at this stage of her development) the names her laughter-loving uncles had given him, and how Uncle Alec had given her a never-forgotten homily on the ethics of honour. And Miss Marjorie with mirth in her eyes reminded Mercy of another saying of hers anent Cherubim and Seraphim, whereat the little girl laughed herself, though with the heightened colour which comes so readily at that age.

" For I really did think that they were two naughty boys who were always crying—and crying in church too. If you had been here then, Miss Marjorie, I should have asked you—and you would have explained."

And then Mercy came and stood beside Miss Marjorie, with her arms about her neck, and said very softly and sweetly :

" I do love you very, very much."

CHAPTER XIII

SCHOOL

It was when Mercy was fifteen years old that it was definitely decided that she should go to school.

It was called going to school ; but as a matter of fact the place where she was to be sent was not exactly a school. It was a pleasant country house situated not very far from Oxford, so that masters and teachers could easily come out to give their lessons, and only about a dozen girls were admitted at a time, and these were all girls between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, and daughters of persons of good birth and unimpeachable antecedents.

The ladies who kept it were three sisters, and this had been their childhood's home and their inheritance. But they, like so many other old families, had suffered heavy losses. And the choice with the Miss Rossiters had been either to give up and sell the old house they loved, or else to open it either to paying guests or to girls for educational purposes.

They had chosen the latter alternative, and had been joined by Mrs Dale, a widowed sister, whose experiences were of value to them. The little enterprise had succeeded. They always had their full complement of boarders ; and any girl wishing to enter had to be have application made on her behalf for quite a long time in advance.

So that Mercy had had plenty of time to grow used to the idea, and to look forward with a certain amount of interest and pleasure to the new life which loomed before her. One trouble she had passed through made the prospect somewhat easier, for Captain Muggs was dead ; and during his last year of fading strength, she had felt how hard it would be to leave the faithful old fellow, who shadowed her

82 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

always, and could not bear to be separated from her. So his sudden death one night upon her bedroom door-mat, where he always slept, and upon which he was found dead in the morning, came with a certain sense of relief. And neither dog nor mistress had had to go through any trial of conscious parting.

As for Private Muggs, he had taken an immense liking for Miss Marjoribanks; and she had promised to give him house-room and companionship during the time that Mercy was absent from home. Private Muggs was getting on well in years, and was a splendid guard and most faithful companion. But he had always been used to be with his mistress, and Mercy knew he would pine if given over to kennel life and the society merely of the stablemen and the sporting dogs in their cages.

At this stage of her development Mercy was a slip of a girl, slenderly made and of good average height. She would not be tall according to the modern standard of girlish development; but she promised to attain her grandmother's inches; and Lady Sarah Mainwaring's height at twenty years of age had been pronounced "perfect" by competent judges of female beauty. As for beauty, Mercy had a face about which differences of opinion were likely to arise. The brow was rather over-wide for the finely-cut features below, the big dreamy grey eyes were set rather far apart, and looked out with quiet steadfastness from beneath delicately arched black brows and a thick short fringe of black lashes. The shape of the face was a shortened oval, and the little square chin with a rather deep cleft was expressive of determination. The corners of the mouth were beautifully cut, and showed traces of a lurking dimple at either side; the upper lip was short, just revealing the line of even white teeth. Much of the Quentin beauty had been inherited by the girl; but in her case it took on a certain quaintness of aspect difficult to define. People were wont to speak of her as looking "old-fashioned." Her ways and words perhaps suggested this term, and something in her whole personality bore it out. Her hair would not grow long like that of other girls, but curled round her head in childish

fashion, barely reaching her shoulders. It could not be plaited into the conventional tail; nor converted into a switch of the "flapper" description. It defied the bondage of a ribbon, and had just to be let alone to form a golden-brown aureole about her head, until the time arrived for a maid's skilful hands to weave the heavy, curly masses into some kind of coronet or crown.

Mercy's life had tended to develop in her thoughtfulness and a certain stillness and gentle grace of manner very foreign from the hoydenish high spirits of many of her cousins with whom she from time to time came into close contact. Nevertheless the girl had abundant happiness in her life, and association with Miss Marjoribanks had done much to develop in her a sense of humour, for which her home life—save during the visits of the uncles—did not give much scope.

Her grandparents were very dear to her; and latterly Mr Quentin had begun to inform Mercy of many things concerning the property which were of intense interest to her. But the dominant note of the life at Quentin Easter was one of a hushed stillness and calm dignity. It was all very dear to Mercy, but it was rather like living in the shadows cast by the declining sun. Her own relatives recognised this, and hence the arrangement to send her to Eyton Grange.

Mercy, after the first sense of natural shrinking from so great a change, entered with some sense of zest into the project. By this time her old great uncle—Lady Sarah's brother—was dead. His son reigned now as Lord Parminster at Parminster Towers; Jack was now Viscount Dunmow, and would be a guardsman as soon as he had passed the necessary course of training, whilst his sisters, Mary and Sarah—Lady Moll and Lady Sal, as they were spoken of in some circles—had been sent to the Miss Rossiters for finishing lessons and a certain amount of breaking in. So Mercy knew that she would find these merry young damsels there, from whom she had already heard a good many details of the kind of life the pupils led at this select and homelike seminary.

Miss Marjoribanks rather laughed when she heard it spoken of as "school." She told the modern girls that they

84 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

did not really understand the meaning of that term as her generation understood it. Whether for better or worse things were changing everywhere—more variety, more amusement, more care in every department. Hardships reduced to the minimum, careful explanation in lieu of curt command, and many forms of discipline entirely ruled out.

"We have yet to see how it is going to answer, and what kind of men and women it is going to turn out," she said, speaking to Mercy and a galaxy of girl cousins who were spending a fortnight of the summer at Quentin Easter. "You young people have vastly good times when we were all looking forward to have ours in the years to come. I sometimes wonder whether it is better to enjoy actual concrete pleasures at the moment, or to live in one's own private dreamland world, pressing forward towards the glowing ideals of the future, which are all the brighter from the fact that the present is a time of discipline, probation and in a certain measure of privation."

Mercy understood instantly and smiled response; but the others laughingly declared their preference for having their good things in the present. Miss Marjoribanks was to them just "an old-fashioned dear"; and it was promised to Mercy that she should lose her old-fashioned ways when once she had gone away from Quentin Easter into the atmosphere of a round dozen of everyday girls.

"We'll take care of you and show you the ropes," Sally declared. "We know our way about, Moll and I! You can ride and you can row of course; but we'll teach you hockey and cricket and all those things you have been too *Quentin-Eastery* to learn. And as for the lessons—they're not half bad. You have masters for them from Oxford—quite jolly boys some of them! The old spectacled frump has gone out of fashion, thank goodness! Just one or two now and again. You will like it, Mercy, when you get used to it. And it will do you a world of good to be shook up out of your groove! You want your eyes opened a bit wider, before you take your big plunge and come out."

Thus it came about that upon a pleasant sunny day in September, Mercy found herself driving up the short

avenue of a big square stone-faced house, surrounded by rather flat green meadows, and backed by a hill clothed with beech, larch and oak, knowing that here was the place where for three years of her life the bulk of her time would be spent, far away from the dear familiar faces of home, and amongst strange companions who would expect her to join in their life, and share hers with them after a fashion which she had never done before, save just for a few weeks at a time.

Mercy had, by her own wish, come one day in advance of her cousins, and the other girls. Miss Rossiter always gave new girls the option of doing this, so that they might get a little used to their surroundings, and put their own places in order before the advent of their companions.

So there were no signs of young life about the grounds as the station fly rolled up the drive; and the door was only opened by a solemn manservant, who ushered Mercy into the house and across a fine hall into the drawing-room. But here she was warmly welcomed. There were three ladies in the pleasant sunny room. And Mercy knew from her cousin's vivid presentments which was which of the three sisters, who greeted her kindly, set her down in their midst, and showed by the cordiality of their manners that they welcomed her, and hoped that she would feel happy and at home with them.

Miss Rossiter was tall, handsome, dignified, but in quite a different fashion from the dignity of Mercy's grandmother. Her manner was crisp and brisk, though one felt the underlying commanding power, and her eyes were bright and keen, so that Mercy felt at once that nothing would escape them. She was the eldest of the sisters, and took the first place, although the sad-faced widow in her black garb looked almost as old, and was to Mercy the most interesting personality of the three. The youngest sister, who was not much over thirty, looked almost girlish still, and was the sports mistress of the school. She had an air of abundant vitality and good humour, which made her very popular with the pupils. She had not in the least forgotten her own girlhood, and mixed with the young things at their

86 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

games with great good-fellowship, though she always kept the upper hand.

It was Mrs Dale who presently took Mercy upstairs by the secondary staircase used by the girls. Mercy's room was in an angle of the house. It had two windows, one looking towards the woods behind, the other across a green meadow towards the river, which was wide enough here for plenty of boating, and at the edge of which the long thatched boathouse and the boarded landing-stage could be seen through the thinning leaves of the willows.

"I think this is one of the nicest rooms in the house," Mrs Dale said, in her gentle musical tones. "Your next neighbour is the only other new girl this term beside yourself. She came about an hour ago, and is still in her room. Her name is Alys Ainsley. The poor child lost her father very suddenly only a few weeks ago. He was rather a noted man in his way—an Egyptologist—and Alys sometimes travelled with him. She was coming to us in any case; but this grief has been very sore for her." And Mercy, who was eagerly listening, her quick sympathies instantly roused, saw that Mrs Dale's eyes filled suddenly with tears; and a chord thrilled in her girl's own heart. It was not only Alys Ainsley who had suffered loss and sorrow. This widow with the young face and sad eyes had passed through the fires of sorrow also.

When Mrs Dale had left her, and her boxes had come up, Mercy set herself to the task of putting her things in order, and making some small semblance of home in her little private domain here. The room was simply but prettily furnished, and contained, in addition to the needful plenishings, a small easy-chair, a bookcase and a little writing-table in one window. Mercy set both windows open as she set about her tasks. And through the open casement she presently became aware of a sound which made her pause. Going softly to the window which looked towards the wood at the back, she leaned her arms upon the sill. Then she heard plainly.

Somebody in the next room to her own was sobbing and crying as though her heart would break.

CHAPTER XIV

GIRL FRIENDSHIPS

MERCY's low knock passed unheeded ; but the sounds of woe continued. The listener could bear it no longer. She opened the door and swiftly entered. Along the floor, in an attitude of absolute abandonment, lay a small, slim, girlish form, a head of loosened hair of silky darkness was pillowed upon two outstretched arms flung across the deep low window seat.

Mercy did not hesitate now. She went forward, knelt down and gathered the sobbing creature into her arms.

" Poor little Alys ! Dear little Alys ! " she softly crooned. " Don't cry so bitterly, dear. Let me comfort you. I am an orphan too. I never saw my father. I have only his picture—and mother's—to know them by. Dear little Alys, let me comfort you. And if you want to cry, cry in my arms. Don't think yourself quite alone."

A little tear-stained, dark-eyed face was lifted, and a pair of quivering lips tried to frame a question :

" Who are you ? "

" I am Mercy."

" Mercy ? "

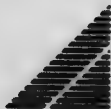
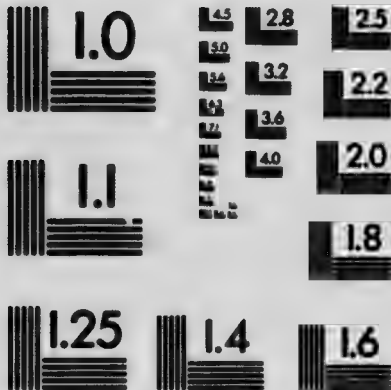
" That is my name. My mother died when I was born. My father had been killed in India in a frontier war. The news had just come. It seemed as though she was out there watching the battle. She kept wringing her hands together and crying, ' Mercy, mercy, mercy ! ' And so when they had to find a name for me, grandfather said, ' Call the child Mercy.' That is why it is my name."

This little story served for the moment to divert the tide of tears which Alys was shedding. She looked a very small, pathetic object crouched upon the floor, her deep mourning



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5999 - Fax

88 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

accentuating the slim lines of her small frame, and her tumbled mass of dark hair giving her an almost infantine appearance. Anything small and weak and friendless made instant appeal to Mercy. She drew Alys up to the window seat, and sat there with her, holding her fast with her arm. She bade her tell of her father whom she had lost, of the life she had led, of the happy wanderings they had had together.

"There were only just the two of us . . . and I used to beg so to be with him. I had lessons when we lived in towns, and he was always teaching me. I knew that some day I was to go to school ; but I never would think about it. He never liked to talk about it either. We both knew it was coming—coming soon. And then last month . . . it was only a cold at first . . . but there was something wrong with his heart . . . and I did not know. . . ."

"Poor little Alys—poor dear little Alys !"

The sobs shook the shadowy frame again. The girl had wasted terribly in her grief. All the latent motherhood in Mercy rose up in an overwhelming desire to help and comfort this forlorn waif of humanity ; and the desire grew all the stronger when she came to know that Alys had very little of this world's possessions to call her own. Her father had saved something, and had deposited a sum in the hands of Miss Rossiter to ensure his daughter's residence with her till she should be of an age to do something for herself. But her income after that would be nil, and she was too young and inexperienced herself to take any cognisance of the future. The overwhelming trouble of the present was all in all to her.

Mercy's cousins and the other girls were ready enough to show kindness to the sorrowful new-comer ; but Alys was not used to girls, and wanted none of them—and showed it. She clung to Mercy—who was only six months her senior—as to the one anchor and stay of her life. And on the whole this dependence of Alys was a source of pleasure and satisfaction to her, since it deepened that sense of responsibility and of solicitous care for the needs of another which had been a quality that Mercy's life had very strongly engendered.

"It's too bad!" her cousins would laughingly declare. "You'll be just the same little old-fashioned moiling, toiling creature here as you are at Quentin Easter—always mussing round after some lame dog or some old fogey out of the ark!"

But though Mercy "mothered" Alys with a tact and tenderness which gradually brought back the colour to the wan cheeks and the light to the wonderful big dark eyes, which all the school admired, she by no means held aloof from her other companions, or failed to take her place in the ordered and pleasant routine of that busy home of education and recreation.

It is true that neither she nor Alys joined in hockey as a pastime; but Mercy was the best rider in the school, and more expert with oar or paddle than anyone else save Molly and Sally Mainwaring. When the summer came she showed quickness and skill at fielding in the cricket field; but she was never expert with the bat.

"You began too late. You had no brothers to drill you," her cousins would tell her, who batted and bowled with energy and success. Girls from neighbouring houses came to join in the sports of Miss Rossiter's pupils; and a very pleasant life the young things led under able guidance and adequate control.

But Mercy all the time through really preferred the hours of study to the hours of play. Learning in class, and hearing lectures from masters of great ability, trained in the exercise of imparting knowledge, was a new experience to her, and full of unexpected delights to the thoughtful girl. Her early classical studies stood her in good stead now. Not only were the dead languages alive to her; but the mental training which she had been through more or less unconsciously in the past gave her advantage now.

She could concentrate her mind upon the task in hand without effort or weariness. Always she walked in a world of widening horizons which seemed to lift ever higher and higher as her steps trod the upward path. Words often recurred which Miss Marjoribanks had spoken to her once; and the truth of which she was learning afresh with every term as it passed.

90 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"Everything is interesting. All knowledge is full of delightful surprises. There is no subject which does not become fascinating when it is studied eagerly and lovingly. Only remember that our human powers are limited. Do not try to take up too many things, however interesting each may be. But master well those you choose—and they will none of them be dull."

So Mercy made a pupil of whom Miss Rossiter was quietly and justly proud. In examinations other girls might surpass her; but Mercy was never jealous, never even surprised; for she was endowed with the grace of humility, and she worked for the love of the task itself, not with the hope of kudos or reward. In the daily round her work was always done with conscientious exactitude which blended quaintly with her real and deep enthusiasm and thirst after knowledge.

"You would be such a splendid teacher, Mercy," Alys would sometimes say, "and I shall be such a bad one. But I suppose that I shall have to teach, whilst you will go home to beautiful Quen in Easter—and reign there like a queen!"

For Alys had seen Mercy's home for herself. The grandparents welcomed her kindly from time to time. But not each time the holidays came round. They had seen the unwisdom of making Alys too dependent upon Mercy—a consummation which might very likely occur were not care exercised. The girl had relations of her mother who were able to give her house-room during the holidays, though they could not do much more for her. Alys had little in common (or so she thought) with these worthy but uninteresting persons. Quentin Easter was to her at once a paradise and a home of delight. Mercy would gladly have held out hopes of asking her there as her own companion and friend when school days should be over; but she always refrained. She was by no means sure what the grandparents would say to such an arrangement, and Mercy very well knew that against their wishes no plan of her own would prevail; and in her heart she cherished a very great respect for the wisdom of those in authority.

Some comprehension concerning the complexities of life was dawning upon Mercy through this period of her development ; and the effect upon her was a salutary dread of giving hostages to fortune either in the way of definite promise or even vague hope outheld.

Mercy made friends with all her companions at school ; but Alys was admittedly her " chum," and the girl who ranked next in her list of intimates was quite the foil and antithesis to the clinging, timid appealing creature whose woe had been the first link drawing the pair together.

Joyce Trevlyn was a red-headed, loosely-jointed, light-hearted Cornish girl, brought up to the roar of Atlantic rollers, in a breezy freedom which made the restraints of school doubly hard to her. She was one year older than Mercy ; but quickly they discovered moods and tastes and talents in common. Joyce had lost her parents, and her old home had been broken up. An uncle was giving her these years at Miss Rossiter's school. She had brothers to look to, but no sisters. Her fortune was but small. She would have to do something for herself. But she was possessed of one great talent—a talent which drew her and Mercy together with magnetic force. Joyce had the artistic temperament in large measure. She could dash off a likeness with a few strokes of the pencil—all her books were adorned with caricatures of masters, mistresses and companions in the guise of bird, beast or fish. If this inveterate scribbling habit got her into occasional trouble, it brought her immense kudos and popularity as a set-off. She and Mercy fraternised first in the drawing class, where Joyce's seascapes and stormy sunsets of huge green rollers evoked wonder and admiration. During the summer months they joined together a sketching class, and Mercy began to learn now to attain some of those effects which had been the desire of her childhood. Joyce encouraged her. Flower-painting was all very well ; but to the Cornish girl it savoured of the " finicking." (" You won't say that when you see Miss Marjoribanks' flowers," Mercy told her—and when that time came Mercy proved herself a true prophet.) But the old desire after landscape work began stirring

92 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

afresh in Mercy's mind, and Joyce encouraged and stimulated this ambition alike by precept and example.

The Miss Rossiters were proud of these two talented pupils, and granted them every facility for prosecuting their studies. This added greatly to Mercy's happiness during her school days, and drew her and the merry-hearted Joyce together in bonds of warm friendship. The Celtic blood in Joyce, which came to her through Irish mother and Cornish father, endowed her with wild high spirits, occasionally dashed with brief periods of brooding melancholy or sudden despair, and presented every point of contrast with Mercy's quiet calmness and reflective, dreamy self-possession. Possibly it was the very force of contrast which drew them together; and sometimes Alys would cling round Mercy's neck asking with wistful appeal:

"Do you love Joyce more than you love me?"

And Mercy, remembering some of the stored experiences of the past years, would answer:

"I don't love either of you better or worse than the other. You are Alys—Joyce is Joyce—and you are both my friends. There will never be any more or less about it. I have room for you both in my heart."

With that Alys was forced to be content; but with a great sigh she gave utterance to another fearful surmise.

"Mercy, darling, you are so rich and beautiful and good; some day quite soon now there will be men who want to marry you. When you get married, and have a beautiful life of your own to live, you won't forget me, will you?"

And Mercy the girl responded as Mercy the child had so often done before, simply, gravely, but with a certain conviction somewhat unusual in a young feminine creature:

"You need not trouble about that, Alys. I should never forget my friends. And I do not much think that I shall ever be married."

CHAPTER XV

ESCAPADES

It must not be supposed that Mercy's school life was free from troubles, or that because she was a girl well trained, and of high ideals and strong principles, she was therefore immune from the temptations and the fiascoes and falls which form one of the inevitable elements of life both at home and at school.

Mercy was far from perfect, and though she had acquired an unusual amount of self-control through association with older persons, whom she subconsciously emulated from her earliest years, yet she was a very human little person in her likes and dislikes, in her fastidiousness and exclusiveness; and though these qualities of hers were not seriously tried at Miss Rossiter's well-ordered and select establishment, yet Mercy often knew what it was to experience gusts of something very like hot passion or supercilious disdain; whilst more occasionally she was betrayed into unguarded speech and hot argument, in which she by no means always came off triumphant.

All her companions liked Mercy; but they did not understand her. Her cousins had prepared them for the advent of a "queer little fish, who had been brought up in the ark," and it was the pronounced intention of Lady Moll and Lady Sal to "knock the nonsense" out of Mercy Quentin, and turn her out better fitted for the sort of life she would have to encounter when she made her *début* in society, was presented at Court, and went through the joys and vicissitudes of her first season.

Most of the girls came from sheltered, luxurious homes, only a little less grand than those of Lord Parminster's daughters. They were all looking forward to their emanci-

94 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

pation from the fetters of school life to enter upon that glorified existence of which their elder sisters told them, and which was the crown of all this preliminary training. Already as a part of their routine and drill they were taught the mysteries of the deep "court curtsy," and in their own big schoolroom they often went through the ceremony of presentation and hand-kissing. Certainly these impromptu rehearsals endowed the girls with an ease and grace in that rather difficult genuflexion which would be likely to stand them in good stead later.

Mercy joined readily in the game; but with a difference. She did not look forward with any delight to her "coming out," which would, she knew now, take place when she was nineteen or twenty, under the able directorship and chaperonage of Lady Parminster.

Her heart was at Quentin Easter. London had few attractions for her. She condemned its gay whirl as froth and frippery, and though often vanquished and routed by the arguments of her loquacious companions, or the political economy of Lady Sal, who was of an eloquent and forensic turn, and whose nimble wits were more than a match for Mercy's dreary inexperience, she always ended by being "of the same opinion still," though she was always ready to admit the other side of the shield, even though her own vision was only able to see the one.

But it was possibly these arguments, together with a recurring sense of home-sickness, which drove Mercy into that longing after solitude that from time to time got her into trouble.

She had not been used to constant association with others. From childhood the large liberty of the Quentin Easter grounds had been hers; the stillness of a great stately house with few inmates, the isolation of spirit which comes with the isolation of bodily conditions; and Mercy often felt actually to *ache* with longing for some still and solitary place, where she could feel herself to be alone.

The ladies she was with would never understand—or so she thought. They would tell her of the garden, the meadows, her own little room—or suggest the empty

gymnasium or drawing-room, with special permission to remain there alone for a while! Joyce had told her that on one occasion when they had exchanged confidences upon this very subject.

For Joyce understood—and Joyce had often transgressed in the past, during her first year, before Mercy's advent, when she had felt the confinement of walls and the stagnant flatness of the midland water-meadows to be past all bearing.

"I escaped in a canoe," she confided to Mercy, "and in the end I was found in Oxford, having a thundering good time with a larky old don, who had picked me up on the river, heard my story, and taken me home to his wife and daughters. But I'd seen the eights practising, and I'd had a simply ripping time! The old boy wired to Miss Rossiter; but he was a real old trump, and stood by me through thick and thin. Luckily he was a bit of a swell, and his word carried weight, else I might have been expelled. I rather think that's what I was playing for. But he saved my bacon for me; and now I've the sense to be glad. All the same I often simply ache to get away from everything and everybody; and, if only the sea were a bit nearer, wild horses wouldn't keep me away from it!"

Perhaps it was Joyce's mention of the canoe which gave Mercy her cue for one exquisite early summer's day in her second year. The woodlands seemed calling upon their child, a cuckoo was shouting in the copses, and the nightingale's silver trill shivered across the water, Mercy escaped one recreation hour down to the boats, and selecting a light skiff, which she could easily manage alone, shot off up-stream, unseen and unsuspected, and passed an exquisite day of utter solitude with the water, the woods, the birds and the flowers; seeing no human face save that of a cottager's wife, of whom she begged a crust of bread and was given a cup of milkless tea, when hunger drove her to investigate the source of a blue spiral of smoke wafted above the tree-tops.

That day was worth the scolding she received upon her return, and the chaffing of her girl companions, who rejoiced

that the "immaculate Mercy" could fall into peccadilloes like all the rest of them. Mercy was sent to her room to repent of her evil ways; and she was rather wondering whether she was to be starved into the bargain; for she was ravenously hungry by this time. However, to her great satisfaction, the door opened at last, and Mrs Dale came in with a tray, which she set before the culprit, and which Mercy fell upon with a zest that for the moment eclipsed all other feelings. Yet after a while she became aware of a pair of soft, sad eyes fixed upon her. Mrs Dale had not quitted the room; but had taken the low easy-chair, and was watching Mercy as she satisfied her healthy girlish hunger.

"Are you all very angry with me?" asked the girl at last, blushing a little, and looking appealingly pretty, her face tanned by the glow of sunshine on water, the wide grey eyes full of light.

"We were very anxious for many hours. But I was sure that you would not get into mischief. I said that you were to be trusted. I knew that it was not the town or the boats that were calling you."

For the stream which meandered through the water meadows below the gardens was a tributary to the wider Isis from which, as Joyce had found to her delight, Oxford and its entrancing sights could so quickly be reached.

"I wanted to be alone," said Mercy simply; "quite, quite alone. I often want that; but to-day I could not help myself. Do you know the feeling of just *having* to do something which you are all the time trying to stop yourself from doing?"

Mrs Dale did not speak. She was sitting with her face towards Mercy, her back to the window. Suddenly the girl was aware that she had asked a question which agitated her companion, although it was agitation so resolutely held in check that Mercy scarcely knew how she had divined it. Instantly she spoke on.

"I never knew I *could* be so hungry! You see I had no lunch, and all breakfast-time I was wondering what I could do to get away, so I forgot to eat much. And all my tea

was one dry crust. And now I think I must feel what little Colin used to tell me about—when Captain Dare shut him up and gave him no food for ever so long. Oh, Mrs Dale . . . you are ill. . . . Let me ring.”

But Mercy’s hand was caught an’ held, and the white-faced lady in the chair smiled at her faintly.

“Dear, it is nothing . . . yes, a glass of water . . . I am used to these little attacks. My heart is not quite strong. But go on with what you were saying. I like to hear it. Was Colin a little boy friend of yours? And why was he . . . starved . . . by . . . what name did you say?”

“Captain Dare, his guardian and relation. Oh, sometimes he was very kind to Colin—and to the animals. But . . . but . . . you never knew. And I used to give Colin chocolate and things to keep; and so if he was shut up without his dinner it did not matter so much. I wonder where he is now—dear little Colin!”

“Don’t you know? Has he gone away?”

“Oh, a long, long time now. Captain Dare went away with him quite suddenly. The House of Dare was shut up. It’s five miles from Quentin Easter. But Colin was only there about two years. I don’t know whether I shall ever see him again.”

“You never write to each other?”

Mercy shook her head and fell into a reverie. Presently Mrs Dale rose, and took away the tray, Mercy carrying it as far as the door for her, and hoping that she was feeling better. For response Mrs Dale bent her head and imprinted a long almost passionate kiss on Mercy’s lips. The girl felt the hot impress of it for long afterwards, and a curious sensation of treading on the threshold of some secret mystery possessed her spirit as she sat by her open window. But what could that secret chamber contain; and who held the key of it? Could it possibly be linked with the name of Dare? And, if so, would she ever learn the truth of the matter?

But more than a year passed by before any fresh light was thrown upon this question, and then it was scarcely light, only a strengthening of Mercy’s conviction. And it

98 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

came about through another of her peccadilloes ; though in this case it was Joyce who led, and Mercy followed somewhat against the grain.

Riding parties under the charge of a master started regularly from The Grange during the two winter terms ; for most of the Miss Rossiter's girls were accustomed to horse exercise and would have felt the lack of it.

Time had been when Joyce, with burning, longing eyes, had watched the departure of other girls along the avenue, these riding lessons not coming within the scope of her uncle's purse. Never a word of complaint had passed her lips ; but Mercy understood. Mercy asked and obtained permission to mount Joyce at her own expense. Her spare habit fitted her friend ; and a new and intense delight was added to the Cornish girl's other pleasures.

Joyce, if not the graceful and finished horsewoman that Mercy was, had all the ease and courage which comes of bare-backed riding on moor-bred ponies from early childhood. In the saddle she was perfectly and absolutely happy. She and Mercy almost always rode together. Joyce had a way of engaging her comrade in eager talk, and distancing the others, so that for a time they enjoyed the sensation of a solitary excursion just by themselves. This was a joy to both ; and the riding master being good-natured, and knowing the girls to be perfectly safe and in full control of their mounts, never seriously found fault, or spoke of the matter at Headquarters.

But as the wise old proverb says : " Much would have more," and so it came about that, upon one soft and delicious November day, Mercy and Joyce got themselves into the biggest scrape of their lives !

But who could help it ? They had not known when they outpaced their companions and found themselves alone in a narrow muddy lane that there was going to sweep by, or that the horses they rode, being one-time clever hunters, simply would not stand the music and the joyous excitement without breaking away to join the merry throng.

" Can't help it, Mercy ; I've got to go ! " cried Joyce, as her chestnut made for the gap through which the redcoats

were vanishing one by one. "Do as you like. Don't bother about me. But it's the chance of a lifetime—and I'm off!"

Then in a few seconds of time Mercy had to make up her mind whether to abandon Joyce to her own devices, and let her follow the hounds alone, or whether to kick over the traces herself and bear her company.

Perhaps the horse decided the matter, for without a second's hesitation he was after his comrade through the gap and up the long trend of grassland in the wake of dappled sides and waving tails, and in company of a couple of score excited hunters hot after a hot scent.

Oh! the glory of that flying through the air to the music of the hounds and the shouts of the huntsman and his whippers-in! Mercy abandoned herself to the joy of the going. Neck and neck she and Joyce rode, making nothing of the small obstacles over which their horses sailed with an ease and skill and judgment which betokened that this was no new pastime for them.

Mercy saw it all as one in a dream; but the keen observant eyes of Joyce were everywhere at once. Oh! the glory of it all! The whistle of the soft south wind in her ears, the glorious bounding motion beneath her, the sense of utter freedom; the press of eager faces round her, the sight of splendid horsemanship, the beauty and courage of the grand creatures who carried their riders through thick and thin!

No one spoke to the girls or molested them in any way. It was a large field, and many strangers were present. They won plenty of admiring and approving glances; but no one ventured a liberty. And when, after a splendid run of nearly two hours, there was a kill in the open, the schoolmates by common consent reined back out of the press, and exchanging glances of mutual understanding, triumph dashed by a sense of compunction—if not of consternation—discovered that at three o'clock in the afternoon they were a good seven miles from home.

"We're in for it now and no mistake!" quoth Joyce.
 "But, Mercy, it was worth it. If they expel us I shall say

100 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

the same. It was worth it. Oh, I wonder whether they ever have girl whips to any hunt. If they do I vow I'll apply for the next vacant berth!"

It was growing dusk before the two culprits turned into the avenue, to see the windows lined with heads, and to find the riding master pacing up and down, his horse lathered with foam, its drooping head indicating its condition of fatigue, whilst the man himself . . .

Well, he did not say much. Perhaps he felt he might say too much; and there upon the threshold were the she-dragons of feminine propriety. The horses' coats and feet betrayed them. These young madams had been hunting on their own account. Let the duennas settle accounts with 'em. The master took off his hat with a vicious gleam in his eyes as he regained his property safe and sound. His good nature had been tried to the breaking point. Now let the storm burst over the minxes' heads. They deserved it!

CHAPTER XVI

MRS DALE

WELL, the storm did break ; and it raged fiercely ; and was all the more alarming because it raged without violence, but rather after the fashion of an icy blizzard.

For three days the two culprits kept to their own rooms, separated from their companions, who were dying to hear all about the most daring escapade which had ever taken place from beneath the roof of this select academy.

Mercy was penitent, but would never defend herself at the expense of Joyce. Joyce cheerfully claimed all blame for the pair of them, and showed such a jubilant and undaunted front, and was so genuinely pleased with herself and the whole affair, that it was difficult to know how to take her.

Letters from relatives came in due course, emphasising the risk they had run and the enormity of this breach of discipline. Mercy made her apology with a sincere realisation of and regret for the anxiety and suspense suffered by her teachers upon that memorable day ; but Joyce remained hopelessly imperturbable and impenitent.

" I'm awfully sorry I can't be sorry—but I just can't," she confided to Mrs Dale, who came to visit them many times daily in their respective rooms, where they spent the greater part of each day in seclusion. " I'm no end sorry that you were all in such a stew ; and of course I know it was awfully wicked and all that. But it was so perfectly heavenly whilst it lasted ! I dream of it every night ; and I think of it all day ! It would just be a lie to say I was sorry I'd done it ; and I'd rather be punished all the rest of the term than tell a downright whopper with open eyes. So now you just know how things are—and you are a dear ! "

Joyce hugged Mrs Dale with a whole-hearted bear-like hug; for she knew perfectly well that this sad-eyed, sweet-voiced lady had a soft place in her heart for the culprits, and that she had long since forgiven them herself.

Mercy had come to a very similar conclusion; and, if the simple truth were to be spoken, she did not find these days of solitude, and the quiet garden exercise with Mrs Dale for a companion, at all wearisome or trying.

By very gradual degrees she and the young widow had grown together into a certain mutual relationship not easily to be defined. It was not like the pleasant friendship which even when she was younger had been established between Mercy and Miss Marjoribanks. Mrs Dale was in a position of authority, and neither of them forgot this. She did not teach or superintend the studies of the girls. Her own education had been cut short by an early marriage; so much Mercy knew, and no more. But that some tragic happening had cut the thread of her married life, or that this married life had enshrined some hidden tragedy, Mercy was firmly convinced. And a tender pity often welled up in her heart towards a being whom she felt to be spiritually isolated, even though she dwelt with her own people, and who was, so Mercy felt convinced, suffering from the hurt of an incurable wound which sometimes bled inwardly still.

And in some way difficult to define Mrs Dale seemed to cling to Mercy. She made excuse to come to her room without definite cause; she smiled when Mercy pushed her into her own easy-chair and begged her to stay for a talk. Mercy very soon learned that she herself had to do nearly all the talking on these occasions; also that Mrs Dale never wearied of hearing about her early childhood, and in particular that portion of it with which little Colin Dare was linked up. Not that she often spoke the name of Dare. But Mercy knew without that; knew by the light which flashed into her eyes: knew by the manner in which she sometimes smilingly said: "Now, tell me again about Private Muggs! I never knew such a delightful name for a dog!" And since Private Muggs had been Colin's property his history involved a good deal of talk about

Colin also. But of herself Mrs Dale never spoke, save now and again of her own childhood and early girlhood. Of the brief span of her married life, never a word ; and never once did she mention her husband or any person of his name. And a girl who has passed her seventeenth birthday, and is standing as it were upon the threshold of life, begins to notice these things.

When Mercy and Joyce regained the schoolrooms, and the life of the house went on for them as before, Joyce was found to be a more entertaining and important personage than ever. Of course she had been the leading spirit—everybody knew that ; and she had spent her time of seclusion in making the most fascinating series of sketches of the hunt, together with portraits of a number of the men, whose faces she recalled vividly ; and she was in the greatest request to give full account of the whole escapade, and to discourse upon the horsemanship of the different personages whom she portrayed.

"It was that dark-faced man who was the pick of the field !" Joyce declared, as she indicated one of her drawings. "Mercy, did you notice him ? He wasn't in pink ; but he rode like a Centaur. He made his own line ; and half the field followed him—when they dared. There's his head in big—and here he is in little on his raking chestnut." And Joyce tossed the two drawings over to Mercy, the bol' head in crayons fluttering down upon her desk, where it lay just beneath her eyes, causing her a great start of surprise.

Looking up at her with the straight dark glance she so well remembered, and which Joyce had caught with her dashing facile pencil, was the face of Captain Dare—older than when she had seen it last some seven or eight years ago ; but the unmistakable Dare face for all that. Mercy picked it up quickly to hide her start of surprise. The smaller sketch of the man in full cry after the hounds recalled his daring horsemanship and ease of seat, with the long downward thrust of the foot into the stirrups which had always characterised his riding, and which recalled him afresh to Mercy's mind as she sat gazing at the clever impressionist drawings.

104 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"I did not notice anyone in particular—there were so many," she said presently. The girls were all chattering and laughing over the story and the illustrations of the hunt, and Joyce with swift and eager strokes of crayon or pencil was illustrating her theme, to the delight of all the party. Alys came and hung over Mercy's shoulder.

"Oh, what a handsome man!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, it is a handsome face," said Mercy slowly, "but rather a cruel one, don't you think?"

Alys was eagerly devouring the pictures with her eyes.

"Oh, I don't know. Yes, perhaps; but not more than a hero and a soldier ought to be, you know. I love them dark and fierce and rather terrifying. Tame men I despise. I'm sure that man must be a soldier. He has such a splendid romantic face. Don't you think so, Mercy? I wonder you did not notice him yourself."

Mercy carried off the two sketches with her. Joyce had been dashing off others, and they were not missed. In her own room Mercy laid them down upon the table, where the light from her reading-lamp fell full upon them. At dusk the girls were allowed to go to their rooms if they wished to read quietly before dressing for the evening meal. It was at this hour that Mrs Dale often made some excuse to enter Mercy's room. She had oversight of these, together with other domestic duties. And to-night she came.

Mercy's face was in the shadow, and she instantly noted the start and the forward step as Mrs Dale caught sight of that pictured face. Her own seemed to go slowly white and rigid. But the shade of the lamp might perhaps . . .

"Who is that, Mercy?"

"Isn't it strange? That is a sketch Joyce made of a man she saw in the hunting field, following the hounds. And it is so exactly like Captain Dare—who was Colin's guardian and cousin, you know, that I don't see how it can be anybody else."

Mrs Dale slowly subsided into a chair beside the table, and leaned her head upon her hand. She seemed to be studying the two drawings. It was a long time before she spoke.

"Did you see him, Mercy?"

"No. I was not noticing the people much. Joyce sees everything. But it must be Captain Dare."

"Rolfe Dare—hunting in Oxfordshire! My God!"

The words were only breathed, scarcely even whispered; but Mercy heard them. How did Mrs Dale know that his name was Rolfe? And why did it matter to her where this man was?

Again dreamy words scarce above the breath:

"The Dare face—such a marked face—all the men have it. A Dare it must be . . . but what Dare?"

And again Mercy asked of herself what this sad-eyed woman knew concerning the House of Dare.

But that question was not destined to receive any answer. Mrs Dale spoke of other things, rose soon and moved away, with a curiously fixed expression upon her white face, as though she walked in her sleep. Mercy was left alone with her sketches and her wonder.

Some mystery there was; but would she ever learn it?

BOOK III
THE DEBUTANTE
CHAPTER XVII

PARK LANE

MOLLY and Sally, the "Lady Moll" and "Lady Sal" of Mercy's schooldays, Lord Parminster's two pretty unmarried daughters, had their own rather charming sitting-room in their father's big and beautiful house in Park Lane. And this room had windows opening upon the garden, where by means of great plants and orange-trees in tubs, and a number of such flowering shrubs as can be coaxed to flourish and bloom in London, an illusion was effected of remoteness and peace, which even the muffled hum and roar of the great thoroughfares around could not entirely dispel.

Here upon a late afternoon in early May the two pretty sisters were comfortably ensconced, with something of expectation in their aspect, as though they waited for the advent of some expected guest.

Several years had passed by since these young creatures had left the precincts of Miss Rossiter's establishment and been introduced to the gayer life of their father's town house through the whirl of the gay London season. And Molly, who was three and twenty, was engaged to be married, quite satisfactorily, to the soldier son of a great house. Sally had so far turned a deaf ear and a saucy retort to all whispered words of love; and was as fancy free as in the days of her merry girlhood. Sally professed "advanced" ideas, smoked cigarettes and talked politics with an irresponsible disregard to party rulings which gave her the reputation of an embryo wit. Her little witticisms were

108 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

not very brilliant or strikingly original ; but she had a sparkling way of speaking them, and the dimples in her saucy face were so irresistible that she never lacked the applause of her audience, and was accounted a success wherever she went.

The cloud-burst in South Africa had shadowed her first season and the national mourning her second. Now the golden Coronation year was filling town with crowds from all parts of the world. Houses in Mayfair and all the fashionable centres were at a premium, and everywhere the most brilliant season was anticipated.

And Mercy Quentin was to come up from her secluded life in the country, for Lady Parminster was to introduce her to her own world during the next few weeks, and present her at Court so soon as the new Queen's Drawing Rooms should be held.

Many things had conspired together to hinder the début of this cousin of theirs. For the war had taken toll at Quentin Easter. The sailor son, who had done gallant work with the naval guns at a critical moment in the war, had received a wound of which little was thought at first. Later on blood poisoning set in with virulent force ; and there was a tablet in Quentin Easter church to the memory of Roderick Quentin, whose body the sea had received.

The blow fell heavily upon the aged parents. And Mr Quentin's health gave way to such an extent that he was ordered abroad for one winter, to see what change of scene and a sunnier clime would do for him. But though he picked up a little during the first months, the improvement was not maintained. Mercy accompanied her grandparents abroad, and they spent the best part of a year away. Then all his longing was to get home, that he might die at Quentin Easter. And whilst all the nation was mourning for its Great White Queen, that little corner of her wide domain had its own days of extra mourning to keep ; for the kind and wise rule of the good old man, whom all had had cause to reverence and to love, now ceased to be.

This was a year ago ; and Lady Sarah Mainwaring

had decreed that Mercy's coming-out could not longer be delayed; for in a few weeks now she would come of age, and as the heiress of Quentin Easter a new life would of necessity begin for her there, for which this presentation to society was a fitting introduction.

Molly and Sally had seen but little of Mercy since their schooldays; for the gatherings at Quentin Easter, which used to be such a regular part of the year's routine, had been suspended during this period of national stress and individual loss. Not since the outbreak of the war had there been any large gathering there, and the last time that Lord Parminster's daughters had seen their cousin was when they had met at the Italian lakes, before Mr Quentin's condition became so critical as to decide them to take him home at all cost.

Now they were awaiting her with interested speculation, wondering what she would like, and how she would enjoy the gay whirl of a brilliant season, whether she would make a successful *début*, or whether she would be like "a fish out of water," as Sally phrased it; or as Molly more elegantly expressed the same idea—"a soul apart."

A firm manly tread down the passage towards their room made both sisters "prick their ears," though certainly this was not Mercy's step, neither was it that of any soft-footed servant. The door opened briskly, and instantly both girls were on their feet.

"Uncle Alec!"

Strictly speaking, Colonel Quentin (as he now was—the war having given him step after step) was not the uncle of Molly and Sally; but the Mainwarings and Quentins had been so closely connected by more than one marriage in generations gone by, and by a great intimacy through many past decades, that the girls regarded him as such, just as they always called Mercy their cousin, though second cousin was the actual relationship she bore. This soldier uncle was a mightily popular personage with both these young maidens, as their eager voices and bright welcoming glances clearly testified.

Colonel Quentin being stationed at present at the Houns-

110 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

low Cavalry Barracks, they saw a good deal of him, and never a bit more than they wanted. He treated them rather as though they were still the pair of merry young hoydens which they had chosen to show themselves at the outset of their career. Molly was now taking on the dignified airs of an embryo bride, whilst Sally remained an original, the balance swaying betwixt irresponsible gaiety and a little assumption of definite views upon a wide range of subjects which vastly entertained the soldier uncle, who refused to treat her seriously. But that did not matter; they both adored him; and gave him rapturous welcome.

"Mercy arrived yet?"

"No, but the carriage has been gone ages. She may be here any moment. Have you brought Jack with you?"

Jack—otherwise Viscount Dunmow—was Captain in the regiment of which Colonel Quentin was in command. They had both been through the war, and had returned safe and sound. In old days there had been doubts about Jack's passing his examinations for soldiering; but the urgent need for men on the outbreak of hostilities had served his turn, and he had shown himself a fine soldier, and had received notice on more than one occasion. His parents were divided in mind as to whether or not he had better remain in the army; but for the present there he was, and mightily proud his younger sisters were of him.

"No, Jack had duties to keep him in barracks. He'll be along another day. He hasn't been down to Quentin Easter since he got back."

"No; and, Uncle Alec, Sally and I have such a nice plan for Jack and Mercy—what do you think it is?"

"Oh, you goose!" cried Sally, catching Alec Quentin's eye. "You've just given the whole show away putting it like that!"

They all laughed together, and the Colonel, patting Molly's pretty, wavy hair, remarked:

"Young ladies who have parted with their own liberty always seem anxious that their friends and companions should go and do likewise—is that it, Molly Mavourneen?"

Molly laughed and blushed most becomingly.

"Well, Uncle Alec, it would really be very nice! Mercy is almost like a sister to us—in a way; and then there is Quentin Easter! You know that in a week or two she will come of age and have everything. Of course Great-aunt Sarah will go on living there as long as she does live; but she would have it left to Mercy. We all know all about that. It's no good pretending differently."

"The modern maiden abhors subterfuge in any form—or even the graceful veil of reticence!"

"Don't be nasty to us, Uncle Alec!" spoke Sally, perching her small and trimly appointed person on the arm of the chair into which Alec had fallen. "There was a heap of talk about it all when—when—" Sally swallowed down the next words, and her listener nodded comprehension. He had been in South Africa when his father died; but he had heard about the family conclave anent the will, and how it had been the wish of his mother herself that the property should be willed direct to Mercy, who should take over all legal control so soon as she came of age. "We can't help hearing and knowing; and naturally we have our own ideas. And one of these is that Mercy will want somebody to help her, and to live with her at Quentin Easter. And naturally a nice husband would help her best—and Jack is particularly nice. You must own that yourself!"

"And it isn't as though it would be fortune-hunting for Jack!" cried Molly eagerly. "Because, of course, some day he will have Parminster and this house—and everything! And he has quite a nice little fortune now, and he likes land and sport and all that sort of thing! And if he and Mercy marry and have children, Quentin Easter would do for the second son, who would probably be quite grown up and able to manage it by the time that Jack was Lord Parminster; for his father is quite young still! Are you laughing at us, Uncle Alec, for wanting nice things for Jack and Mercy?"

The Colonel was scarcely laughing; but he was smiling with a certain sense of humorous appreciation of the situation.

"I was merely comparing the methods of the twentieth-century maidens with those of a hundred years ago."

112 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"Uncle Alec," declared Sally, shaking her forefinger at him warningly, "I don't believe that it's the girls who are different one little bit. It's only that they say the things now which before they only thought. But they thought them just the same, and I think they kept them shut up and compressed and messed about till they got quite sour and nasty! Now we speak out what we think."

"No one will deny that, Sally!"

"And let's get it off our minds, and it's much more wholesome! Oh, Uncle Alec, do be on our side about Jack! Because we're so horribly afraid that Hugh will want her too! And he's so very handsome and attractive—and of course his parents would like it tremendously—and Hugh was always very chummy with Mercy."

"But they're first cousins," Molly said sagely; "and it's much better to marry a second cousin than a first. Everybody says so—especially in old families like ours. You needn't laugh, Uncle Alec; I've heard quite wise people say that."

"Hark! Listen!" cried Sally starting up and making a dash for the door. "I knew I heard something! That's Mercy coming!" And she flung the door open wide.

CHAPTER XVIII

ENTER MERCY

SHE came in with a smile on her face, and was for a moment swallowed up, as it were, in the embraces of her cousins. It was a few moments before she was aware of the tall soldier-like form in the background. But when she saw her uncle her whole face beamed, and her eyes shone with welcoming happiness.

"Oh, Uncle Alec—*how* good of you to be here!"

"All well at Quentin Easter, eh? Who is with the grand-
father? Aunt May and Uncle Tom? That's all right!"

"And it's only for three weeks I am here—at first," said Mercy, "for I have to be at home for my birthday—when I come of age."

"Of course. We are all going down for that! It will be a delightful Quentin Easter party again. But we shall bring you away with us afterwards, Mercy. You will have to be here for the Coronation; and for all the after-season gaieties. It is going to be the sort of season one only gets once in a while! Oh, it was worth waiting for—you'll see!"

The servants were bringing in tea, and Mercy took a low seat beside her uncle. His keen kindly eyes sought her face and dwelt there with interest. He had only seen her once since his return home, when he had paid a brief visit to his mother; for he was in a responsible position, and his military duties claimed the bulk of his time. He felt that he had in some sort to remake the acquaintance of the little niece whom he remembered best as a small, serious, flower-faced child with a great brindled dog at her heels. During her girlhood he had been almost entirely in India, and then had come the war which for another two years had

114 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

kept him from home. This tall and slender girl was in some sort a stranger to him ; though he realised instantly that he had changed far less to her than she to him.

Yet as he studied the face he found much which recalled the child Mercy of past days. Flower-like the face was still, with its flawlessness of texture and colouring, its serenity of outlook, its quality of purity and detachment from anything earthly or unclean. The delicate finely-cut features were those he remembered in the child face, and the soft masses of waving brown hair, with strands and gleams of gold, which any strong light brought out vividly, seemed little different from the golden-brown aureole which had shaded the face of the little Mercy of long ago. Very thick hair had Mercy ; but it still refused to grow long. Yet it was long enough to be fastened up in a picturesque *negligé* fashion which became her well. The big grey eyes with the thick short black fringes and delicately arched and very black brows still looked out upon the world with a directness of gaze in which dreaminess and observation were piquantly blended. The face of the girl was slightly less grave than that of the child had often been. The curve of the short upper lip, a gleam in the depths of the eyes, the play of a dimple in the small cleft chin, all bespoke the readiness of the smile which, when it came, lighted the face like a gleam of sunlight upon dreaming water. Mercy's face in rest might pass without exciting the admiration of the casual onlooker, but when it lit up as she spoke or laughed, then came a subtle play of expression which instantly arrested attention ; and the longer the gaze rested upon that face, the more certain became the observer of its charm and delicate beauty.

The chatter of the merry sisters gave Alec Quentin ample time for these observations. Mercy had many things to say and many things to hear before she could turn once more to her uncle ; but when she did so it was with an eager smile, and in response to a question he had asked of her.

" Oh yes, the darling, he is alive still, and what Miss Marjorie calls 'going strong.' But we don't call him Private any more. He is General Muggs now ! He got

his stripes very early on after Miss Marjorie had him. Then he stopped there a good while—for there could not be another Captain Muggs of course! But by-and-by he was Major Muggs, and in the war he went up hand over hand. Now he has brevet rank as General, and when I come of age I think I shall make him Field Marshal!" And there Mercy stopped and laughed in a sweet spontaneous fashion that Alec delighted to hear. "I'm afraid I am a great baby over Muggs! But he has always been like a part of my life. First his father and then himself. Uncle Alec—do you know anything more about Colin?"

"Only what I told you when I was at Quentin Easter. He was with the Irregulars—but I never saw him, though I heard of him. I believe he is still out yonder, for the guerilla war is hard to stamp out. It really is almost over now. Peace is all but in sight. But whether Colin Dare will come back to England I cannot tell. The free, wild life out yonder has a great attraction for some men. He may be one of those. He has the roving Dare blood."

"I should like to see Colin again," said Mercy, with her chin in the hollow of her hand; and at these words Molly and Sally exchanged glances, and the latter remarked gaily:

"You will have such a lot of friends and admirers now, Mercy, that you will not have time to bother about one who may be missing!"

A gleam flickered in Mercy's eyes as she looked at the speaker in the way Sally remembered very well.

"New friends may be very nice; but they can't be like old ones. Colin had General Muggs when he was a puppy."

Her cousins shrieked with laughter; but her uncle understood, and gave Mercy's hand a little friendly squeeze, which she returned with interest. The gleam deepened in her eyes and the dimple came into evidence in her chin.

"They are so young, those two," she said indulgently.

"We understand, Uncle Alec—we old stagers!"

"Take care, Mercy," cried Sally, wiping her eyes, "it's all very well to put on old-maid airs when one is young and pretty; but don't overdo it! Demure little pussy-cats aren't in the fashion now. One has to be very up-to-date

116 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

and *previous* to make the running to-day ! And it's less and less easy every year, I assure you. For there are always the fresh little girls coming to the fore, though the mothers and the grandmothers never grow a bit older, and want just the same notice and attention themselves. It's a frightful crowd and hustle ; and if you don't do some hustling yourself, you just get left out of it. Of course being an heiress gives you a big advantage. Only on the other hand there are drawbacks. It's more romantic when one's face is one's fortune ; but it doesn't pay so well ! "

Mercy's face, which had been rippling with an inward mirth, assumed another expression at this moment. She looked at her uncle and asked a question.

" Do you remember Mr Earle ? "

" What ? The Cherubim ? "

Mercy's soft laugh rang out as she signed her assent ; and then she told him the last item of news from Quentin Easter.

" He is a nephew of my Miss Marjoribanks—at least he calls her aunt. I think he was a cousin's son really. He was in the war too, and was wounded and had enteric. He is on his way home ; and grandmother is going to give him the living of Quentin Easter. It is the last time we Quentins shall use the advowson. And the Bishop knows all about the appointment—and approves it very much. When I come of age I am going to hand it over to him. Grandfather and grandmother both approve of it. Clergymen ought to be appointed by bishops, not by lay persons. But Mr Earle is to be our next Rector. You know Dr Ringer died last winter."

" Earle is a fine fellow. I heard a good deal of his work in India. I knew he was with the troops in South Africa ; but I never knocked up against him. Well, I'll be glad to see him again. And now I must be off. I've an appointment to keep at the club. Good-bye little girls ! Sally, don't inoculate Mercy with too much worldly wisdom all at once. Let her down gently ! And send me a card for her first ball. I must see my real niece make her *début* ! "

" I call that horrid of you ! " cried Sally, " trying to put us outside the pale. I'm just as good a niece as Mercy."

Alec fled, foreseeing a clapperclaw; and Sally laughed derisively, commending the soldier who ran away.

Then she danced Mercy up to her room, which was not quite strange to her, and surveyed with interest the frocks and wraps and chiffons from Paris which the maid was unpacking and laying out in due order in the spacious drawers and wardrobes.

"Nearly all white. . . . Well, I suppose that's right for a first season, and these trimmings are a dream—I don't know how they combine so many colours together and get that delicate shimmer like gossamer in the sunshine! Oh, you'll do, Mercy. You've the equipment of a young princess! I say, will you ride early in the park with me to-morrow? Moll likes the fashionable parade, which I only tolerate *after* a real ride. And I know you are an early worm—or bird—or whatever the creature is that gets the other!"

Mercy was delighted to promise; and delighted as, in the early freshness of the May morning, when hot sunshine struggled with a keen cold wind for mastery, she and Sally rode forth together, well mounted and well equipped for that gay swinging gallop over the soft tan, which can only be enjoyed at an early hour of the day.

There were just a few pedestrians out in the walks beside the wide tan ride—children with their nurses or governesses, sent out by parents who approved of early exercise.

As Mercy reined in her horse after a breathless gallop, in which Sally had been distanced by many hundreds of yards, she was suddenly aware of the eager gaze of a pair of dark wistful eyes; and a little gasp of astonishment and delight broke from her lips.

"Alys! Is it really you?"

Alys it was; holding by the hand a small girl in sandals and without any headgear, who gazed up at the pretty lady on horseback with a pert twentieth-century curiosity which she did nothing to disguise. But Mercy had no eyes for the child. Her gaze was riveted upon the pale and weary face of the shabby little governess—for such was obviously Alys's position.

118 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"Dear Alys—how pleased I am to see you. I was going to take the first opportunity of coming to you. I thought you were living with that aunt of yours in Bayswater."

"So I was—when I wrote last. But she gets tired of having me; and then I try to get a place. I have done it before. I teach a little, and go out with the different children dressed as their mother approves," and Alys cast a disdainful glance at the odd little figure beside her. It was evident that she did not love her small charge, and certainly the child did not look one to win affection. "I saw in the papers that you were coming to town. Oh, Mercy, it must be like a fairy tale! And you look so beautiful. And your horse—and groom—and oh, here is Lady Sal!"

Sally rode up and greeted Alys in her cheery way. She and Molly had never cared particularly for the timid, shrinking girl who had been Mercy's devoted worshipper. But she spoke to her with friendliness and let the small child with rather grubby little ungloved paws stroke her horse whilst Mercy and Alys exchanged confidences.

Then the cousins rode away together, leaving Alys gazing after them with wistful, tear-filled eyes. Though even her tears were gilded by the brightness of a new and gladsome hope; for Mercy's parting words had been:

"Indeed I will come and see you soon—as soon as I can."

And one of Mercy's chiefest qualities was that she never broke a promise.

CHAPTER XIX

MERCY'S BALL

It was well known that the great ball Lady Parminster had arranged for the second week in May was to be the occasion of the *début* in society of a young kinswoman of her husband, who was reputed to be heiress to, if not actual owner of, a large property and substantial income.

It was no question of millions. It was no case of American dollars piled up by an enterprising father, and squandered in Europe by a charming daughter with a pretty face and doubtful accent and antecedents.

Here the matter was of a fine old English property, an English maiden with a good old name and long-standing tradition behind her, and connections with the old landed aristocracy of the country, which so despised the mushroom titles now freely lavished upon mere accumulations of wealth that old Mr Quentin had thrice refused a peerage, deeming his local title of "Squire" to be the finer thing.

Mercy, in her first ball dress—a shimmering thing of whiteness, frosted with silver, and touched here and there with gold—like a May meadow with the light of dawn upon it—gazed at her reflection in the long glass, while her cousins inspected her with a critical admiration, and, finally, on fairy feet, danced gaily round her, clapping softly a dainty applause.

"Well, what do you think of yourself, Miss Gravity? Are you a beauty, or are you not? For that is the momentous question which some society leader or some maker of epigrams will settle once and for all to-night!"

Light shot from the eyes which were gazing meditatively into the great glass, and when Mercy's eyes smiled like that they were very sweet, and deliciously childlike. The soft

120 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

colour rose in her cheek, and the short upper lip curved bewitchingly.

"I like my face," she said very simply. "And Marie has done my hair beautifully. I only hope I shall not dance it down. But I should have liked rather less neck and arms. . . ."

Sally went off into a merry explosion.

"My sweet child, you have the minimum which can pass! And with a skin like yours. . .! You'll admire some of the sights you will see to-night! Oh, I agree that the minimum is best. And whatever orders Granny Sarah gave to Paris, they have done the right thing! That soft filmy lace round your shoulders, where dewdrops seem hiding themselves—it's real cunning! And the way the skirt hangs—I'm quite green with envy."

"I shall never believe that: you know you are just perfect yourself. You look like Aurora herself, robed in the sunrise."

"You are a darling to say so. Now let us all go down. I expect Uncle Alec and Jack will have arrived by now. Jack is to have leave till Monday. How long is it since you saw him, Mercy?"

"Oh, a good many years now," she answered. "Not since the last big gathering at Quentin Easter. Does he like to be called Jack or Dunmow?"

"Oh, Jack, by you, of course. We only call him Dunmow when we are displeased with him! Good old Jackie! He does get into scrapes sometimes; but he's the dearest of dear boys for all that!"

They went down arm in arm—three attractive types of girlhood—descending the wide shallow stairs which on the lower level showed floral decorations and cunning arrangements in electric lighting. There were troops of liveried servants gathered together in groups, and a hum of voices reached them from the great ballroom, the magnificent scheme in decoration of which they had been admiring earlier in the day. The heavy scent of flowers permeated the air, though windows were everywhere open, admitting the fresh night air.

"Here she is!" cried Sally, unlinking her arm and running forward over the highly polished and slippery floor. "Jackie boy, come and be introduced afresh to your pretty cousin Mercy!"

They met beneath the eyes of smiling relatives—the dashing young officer of dragoons, and the tall, slender girl with all the dews of youth in her eyes, and the grace of her maidenhood unsmirched and unsoiled. Jack was very bronzed by Africa's suns, and he seemed to have put on height also, or perhaps it was the upright alertness of military training which gave this effect. A goodly young couple in sooth, as some of the elders thought who watched the meeting, and saw the eager admiration in Jack's frank eyes, and the smiling friendly welcome in those of Mercy. Sally stood watching, her small hands clasped round Colonel Quentin's arm; and she whispered in his ready ear:

"Don't they look just made for one another! You will be on our side, won't you?—and give Jack lots of nice little bits of leave, so that he can run up and down and see her often!"

"You little schemer!" The soldier pinched her ear and laughed; then he came forward himself to receive Mercy's eager kiss.

"I say, that doesn't seem fair," remonstrated Jack. "I think cousins ought to take precedence of uncles when it comes to that sort of thing!"

"In Scotland cousins always kiss, I believe," volunteered Molly, joining the group.

"Only first cousins, please to remark," spoke a new voice from the doorway. They wheeled round to see Hugh Leigh approaching with a smile upon his handsome, clean-shaven, dark face. The rising young barrister was very like what some of his elders remembered Frank Quentin to have been at his age. He had the Quentin features very marked, and Mercy's eyes lighted at sight of her old-time playmate and tyrant and suitor. Once he had been nearer to her than any of the other cousins, and she turned to him with shining eyes.

122 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

" Oh, Hughie, how you have grown ! "

How they all laughed ! Hugh possessed himself of her hands, and he raised them to his lips with a very courtly gesture. He possessed more of the courtier in his bearing and speech than did Jack, the soldier. Both were fine types of manhood, scions of good old families, and excellent friends and cronies. Mercy stood between them, looking from one to the other, asking and answering questions, laughing over childish recollections of adventures and differences of opinion in the past. Jack's sisters hovered around them, putting in words here and there, and the parents stood looking at the little group, wondering what the future would hold for those young creatures, and conscious of the strong trend of their personal hopes and wishes.

Then Lady Parminster's duties called her away to the head of her staircase, and soon the rooms were filling to their utmost capacity, and the strains of music lilting through the hot scented air set the rhythmic motion of light eager feet.

Jack and Mercy opened the ball together. The son of the house claimed this privilege, which was at once accorded. Mercy was not by nature self-conscious ; but she knew that this ball was given in her honour, that her name was the one oftenest spoken, that she was watched and pointed out, commented upon, discussed and criticised more than any person in all that crowd to-night. Hence it was a comfortable thing to be surrounded with relatives and friends who were more or less intimately connected with the old life, that for a moment seemed driven backwards to a great distance. She would willingly have danced all the time with her cousin, her uncle, or those friends she had already made during the few brief days of her stay in town. But she played her part with just that maiden dignity and childlike docility which in Mercy Quentin were quaintly blended ; and the evening was not devoid of many pleasant incidents which came with a sense of surprise.

Once it was a round-headed young man who came up to her with a smiling confidence and held out his hand, and that hand, though scrupulously clean and well-kept (for the

moment he was without a glove), showed several curious stains. The twinkling eyes and a certain twist of the lips and twitch of the overhanging brows revived a sleeping memory and Mercy cried out :

" Oh, Gem ! "

" I make 'em call me Jim now—Gem is so rotten. I say; Mercy, what a stunner you look ! I vowed I'd get back in time to see you at this show. But it was a near thing ! "

" Oh, Jim dear, how nice of you ! But I thought you were in Germany, experimenting and inventing and setting the Rhine on fire ! "

" Well, it ain't blazing as much as it ought, seeing that I've been six months more or less on its banks ! And I've got all I want over yonder, and don't cotton much to the beer-drinkers neither. It was America where I found myself best ! Smart chaps, those Yanks ! Sometimes just a bit too spry ! Oh, I've seen a bit of life since I got 'em to let me chuck University and go my own way. I'll tell you all about it in time. Have you got a dance for me ? I'm not a carpet knight like Hugh or Jack, but I'd like a swing round with you, Mercy ! "

" You shall have one of the extras at supper, Jim ; my card is full now. Oh, Jim—do take me out there—where the ices are ! I'm sure I saw a face ! "

" I don't doubt it, my dear ; I've seen a good few myself ! " And as she laughed, recalling the quaint old-fashioned speech of the Gem of her childish memories, she made him lead her out into the long corridor where the buffet stood, and there she came face to face with the owner of that " face " of which she had spoken.

" Joyce, dear Joyce ! Why didn't they tell me you would be here ? Oh, Joyce, how delightful to see you again ! And nobody told me anything about you ! What were Molly and Sally thinking of ? "

" I begged them [not—because I wasn't a bit sure of being able to come ! You see, we are not swells like you ; and I wasn't certain of being able to get either a frock or a chaperon ! "

" What would that matter, Joyce ? "

124 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"Oh, it would matter everything! But I did just long to see you at your coming-out ball, and to hear what people said of you! Mercy, look there!" Joyce held up some ivory tablets, and Mercy saw her own face and figure sketched in Joyce's characteristic fashion in half-a-dozen different phases and attitudes.

"I'm going to work them up at home. Mercy, I believe if you'd let me paint your portrait I could get it into the Academy next year—and be famous for ever."

"Darling!—of course you shall!"

"You angel; it has been my dream; and seeing you like this . . ."

"Joyce dear, you must dance yourself. I know you love it. Oh, here is Uncle Alec; he dances splendidly. I'll introduce him. And when we can arrange it, we must have a long day together."

Mercy was carried off by her next partner, her beaming gaze expressive of such happiness and eager delight that Colonel Quentin said kindly to the simply dressed girl with a great crown of auburn hair wound about her well-poised head:

"What magic have you been employing, young lady, to send my niece away so radiantly jubilant?"

"Ah, I have been telling her how she can help me! Don't you know that that is one of Mercy's qualities? She is never so happy as when she is helping other people to be happy too."

"And where did you learn, may I ask, such an exhaustive comprehension of her character?"

"I was at school with her at Miss Rossiter's. It was I who got her into the worst scrape of that time." And with beaming hazel eyes, filled to the brim with laughter, Joyce gave to Colonel Quentin a full and animated account of that never-to-be-forgotten day, whilst she enjoyed with him the most delightful dance which had ever come her way so far.

"What a lucky girl Mercy is to have you for an uncle," was her final farewell to the amused soldier.

CHAPTER XX

SCHOOLMATES

"WE have never quite lost sight of Joyce," said Molly, as she toasted her pretty slippered feet by Mercy's fire—for May nights are cold, and coldest when the dawn is breaking. Mercy had never sat up till the dawn before, though many times she had risen to see it break over land or sea. But before the girls reached their rooms after the close of the ball, the pink and gold of the chill, pure dawn was breaking in the eastern sky. All the same, sleep was not to be thought of till some discussion had taken place over the happenings of that successful night. "But it is so difficult to see anything of people who live in such a quite different sort of world. Joyce was an art student first, and is still—in a way. But she and three other girls have a studio now together, and Joyce gives lessons as well as learns herself, and is as busy as a bee. We drove over to see her when you were coming, and concocted this plot. She was wild to see you at your ball, and wanted it to be a surprise; so she had an invitation card for herself and any chaperon she could find to bring her. But she didn't know, and we didn't know, whether it would come off. So you were not to be told. I'm glad she came; and she looked very pretty, though rather quaint, in that sort of mermaid dress. I dare say she and her artist friends made it amongst them."

"I thought she looked sweet," said Mercy eagerly. "She has such lovely hair. . . ."

"Yes, a lot of the men were raving about her Titian hair," interpolated Sally, "and asking who she was. Joyce can always hold her own; and she dances as though she had been born dancing, if you know what I mean. I rather think we'll cultivate her. She's not quite like the rest of the girls one meets."

126 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"I'm going to her studio to-morrow," said Mercy firmly. "I've begged for a day off, and I'm going to see Alys and Joyce, and really enjoy myself."

Molly and Sally exchanged glances and began to laugh. In a moment Mercy caught their drift, and her eyes lighted in the charming way that all her friends began to know.

"I won't take back a word I've said. I'm going to enjoy myself to-morrow—I mean to-day—just in my own way! Of course, if you think me such a limited person that I can only enjoy myself in one way—pray do! I've nothing to explain! *Qui s'excuse, s'accuse!* But to-day is to be my very own—to recoup after the exertions of last night; your mother told me so. And I shall spend it as I like. And you can come with me or not just as you choose."

The sisters exchanged glances.

"We shall sleep till nearly noon, I expect," quoth Sally, "and Molly is going to ride with Gore and Jack, and I expect I shall go too. I don't think we care much about the Alys part of the business. But tea in Joyce's studio, if that's the game—that might be rather fun. Did you settle anything with her?"

"She called it her 'diggings'—we were in a hurry; and I said I would try and come this afternoon at four. It is an address in St John's Wood. . . ."

"That's the place all right enough. Well, if we can we'll turn up for some tea. But just fancy this creature, Molly—after her first ball—with her head full of people like Alys and Joyce."

"Well," asked Mercy, with her musical laugh, "what better could I have it full of? Your other friends are very charming; but they are happy and prosperous and don't want me. Perhaps Alys and Joyce do!"

"You'll be the death of me, Mercy, one of those days!" quoth Sally, wiping her eyes. But Molly looked into the fire with a softened expression, and said:

"I wish some of our sort were more like Mercy."

It was certainly rather a source of astonishment to Jack next morning when he heard that Mercy was not to accom-

pany the riding party, but was bent on an errand of her own, and quite declined his proffer of escort.

"You would spoil everything," she told him with sisterly frankness and a quite disarming sweetness of expression. And young Lord Dunmow, who was used to a different kind of treatment from the girls of his generation, watched Mercy drive off in her own victoria with a light of wonder, curiosity and admiration in his eyes.

Lady Sarah had decreed that one of the Quentin Easter carriages with its fine pair of horses should be kept at livery for Mercy, together with her riding horses and servants. This gave her independence to make plans of her own when she so desired; and to-day she felt the benefit of the arrangement, and drove gaily forth upon what she left sure would be a pleasant and successful errand.

It was about two o'clock when she drove up to a narrow house in a dull road in Bayswater, and asked to see Mrs Roby. That lady, who had seen the advent of the stylish equipage to her doors, made her appearance instantly, filled to the brim with expectation and lively curiosity. To be sure, it was rather a drop when she heard that this wonderful guest was a former schoolfellow of the poor little governess, whom she secretly despised and sometimes openly bullied. Nevertheless there stood the carriage at her doors, in sight of all her neighbours; and she was all smiles and affability as she agreed to let Alys remit the afternoon lessons, and pass the time with Miss Quentin.

To see her governess whirled away in that luxurious carriage might be rather a bitter pill; nevertheless the episode shed a reflected glory upon herself, and Alys confided to Mercy that she thought perhaps it might "make a great difference."

Poor little Alys looked very wan and white. Her little story was infinitely pathetic to her listener. Nobody wanted her! She had a sort of home with a snappy old aunt; but she was expected to "do things" for herself, so as to pay for her board and lodging. It was a sordid, miserable existence, and the horizon looked very dark to the delicate girl, who often felt little able to cope with the

128 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

overbearing impertinences of her spoilt child charge, or the demands made upon her by the selfish mother.

Mercy's pity was greatly stirred. Soon, she knew, power and wealth would be hers. Yet she spoke no definite word to Alys; for she knew that she should take no important step without the consent and approbation of her grandmother. Moreover, she felt that, with such a clinging and dependent nature as the one which Alys possessed, care was needed before any responsibility was undertaken, lest this should become a matter of larger proportion than seemed to be the case at the moment.

In Alys's doleful little story one incident stood out bright against the dark background—an incident which aroused Mercy's interest and wonder. She had been in a reverie whilst Alys talked on and on of the dreary round of her daily life, till the sound of a name suddenly aroused her to a sense of her companion's words.

"Did you say Captain Dare? Alys, what do you know about him? You saw him riding in the park; but that would not tell you who he was."

"Oh, but I knew him by the drawings Joyce made long ago—the one you took to your room—the one I thought so splendid. You told me it was Captain Dare. He looks just the same—scarcely any older, and he rides oh! so splendidly, Mercy. . . ."

"But you did not speak to him, Alys?"

"Not exactly; but it came . . . it was close to the gate once. He was going out and we were coming in; and there was one of those nasty motors buzzing about. His horses are very spirited, and there was a sort of scrimmage, and Melinda began to scream and run; and I thought she would be hurt, and I rushed after her, and his horse came nearly down on me. And then afterwards he got off, and somebody held the horse, and he came to us and asked if we were hurt or frightened. Oh, it would be nothing to you, Mercy; but to us it was a sort of wonderful adventure! And after that, whenever we saw him riding, he always took off his hat, and sometimes came and spoke to us. And I told him that once I had seen his house, when I was staying

at Quentin Easter. That made it seem almost as though we were friends."

"Do you see him often?" asked Mercy gravely, noting the flush upon the girl's pale cheek, and the light in the liquid dark eyes, which suddenly made Alys lovely.

"I have not seen him for weeks now. He disappeared, and I don't know anything about him. We often walk early to the park; but we never see him now."

It was a wonderful day for Alys. Mercy drove her hither and thither along bright thoroughfares. They paid sundry visits to shops, and Alys was soon made ecstatically happy by the gift of a charming though very simple summer hat, and a driving-wrap, not too smart for other purposes, in which she looked more in keeping with her present surroundings. They had ices at Gunter's and visited one or two picture galleries which Mercy wanted to see quietly and at her ease; and then when four o'clock had struck—all too soon for Alys—the carriage was turned northward, and Joyce's studio was their destination.

"You were always so fond of Joyce," spoke Alys a little plaintively; and Mercy, recalling the old-time instinctive jealousy, turned upon her with a laugh and a warning head-shake.

"You little goose! If you think that my heart has not room in it for two friendships at once, it is not a heart worth cultivating! I think it will be charming to meet all together again—as we used to do in our rooms at school. I hope Molly and Sally will both be there. Then we can feel that we are all schoolgirls together having a good time!"

Joyce received them in a big blue apron. She looked charming with her white skin, and masses of gold-red hair in becoming dishevelment. The studio was a big place, and Joyce had it to herself this afternoon. Four easels betrayed the partnership of comrades, but none were there on this occasion, though all had contributed flowers for the adornment of the place, and cakes and fruit or sweetmeats for the sumptuous tea which Joyce had been preparing.

Molly and Sally appeared in due course, and the five girls enjoyed one of those pleasant reunions full of reminiscence

130 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

and laughter which grow dearer and more precious as years advance, but which proved very attractive to all of them even now.

Whilst Alys was eagerly listening to Molly's account of her engagement to Lord Gore, and Sally was throwing in a running commentary of her own respecting the qualifications of her future brother-in-law, Mercy made Joyce take her round the studio and tell which of the drawings, studies and pictures upon the walls were her own.

Yet she scarcely needed to be told. There was something in the quality of Joyce's work which differentiated from that of her comrades. There was the spark of the divine fire—that undefinable attribute of genius—which redeemed her crude conceptions from mediocrity, and gave power and grandeur to the dim, stormy seascapes and blazing sunsets that adorned the walls. As for the heads, these each stood out instinct with characteristics which the onlooker felt to be the salient points of the sitter.

"I should like to have my portrait painted by you, Joyce," said Mercy; and Joyce rejoined: "You angel!"

Then before the party broke up Mercy made a statement:

"On the first of June I shall come of age. It is a Sunday, so there will be no feast till the day after. But there is to be a big gathering for it at Quentin Easter, and I know that grandmother will like me to have some guests of my own. If I send you invitations, Alys and Joyce, for my birthday week, do you think you will be able to come?"

Joyce with eager shining eyes said: "Rather!" And Alys, all wistfulness and hope, set her quivering lips fast together.

"I'll come if I die for it!" was the thought in her heart.

CHAPTER XXI

COUSINS

HUGH LEIGH, his attention divided between the polo players and his left-hand neighbour, was of opinion that the prettiest sight which Hurlingham offered upon the sunny May afternoon was the bright-eyed girlish creature who watched the fortunes of the game with such heart-whole interest and attention.

Mercy had never seen polo before ; and Jack was playing. Lord Dunmow's ponies and his daring yet graceful play had won him reputation before. Mercy knew little of the game, save as Hugh enlightened her whilst it went on ; but she delighted in all living things, and the mere exhibition of exuberant life and dashing skill displayed alike by men and mounts riveted her attention and brought colour to her face and light to her eyes.

The day was brilliantly with a nipping wind from the north ; and the becoming combination of a white cloth, gold-laced dress, and sable coat and toque was as appropriate as it was becoming to Mercy's clear skin and golden brown tumble of waving hair.

The old boyish sense of homage and masculine appropriation, which had been Hugh's attitude towards his child companion of long ago, was reasserting itself forcibly once again. It was not because she was the heiress of Quentin Easter, soon to become its mistress *de facto*, though Hugh was enough man-of-the-world to recognise the solid advantages of such a position. It was because she was Mercy—the same little Mercy of long ago, only grown to a delicate, distinctive beauty of which he was increasingly aware each time that he met her, each hour he passed in her company.

He sought to win the sweet responsive light in her thick-

132 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

fringed eyes, to listen to her low musical voice, often broken by ripples of spontaneous mirth. Nothing in the intricacies or the humours of the game escaped her quick and eager gaze. She had no thoughts of self, or of the impression she was making here amongst this gay and fashionable crowd, to divert her from her absorption in the game. What effect she produced upon those about her was the last thing she would ever think about. She had never troubled herself upon such a count, never having realised that any importance could attach to herself. Her training had been of the kind now dubbed "old-fashioned." And the delicate aroma of simple unselfish modesty clung about Mercy, and marked her out in a fashion of which Hugh Leigh was insistently conscious.

He hugely enjoyed his afternoon by Mercy's side, and the way in which she turned to him for enlightenment and instruction was absorbingly delightful. True, there was an almost sister-like intimacy and friendliness about Mercy which was somewhat different from the emotions which he hoped eventually to inspire. But he was one to take the good the gods gave him gratefully, and not ask too much at once. When Jack came up flushed with victory to receive Mercy's plaudits, and show her the ponies, which she caressed with gentle hands, speaking the sweet words to which all animals so quickly respond, the two young men accompanied her hither and thither, and they were very well aware of the admiring glances which were bestowed upon their companion as she walked between them, something in her elastic step and buoyancy of movement differentiating her alike from the languid society dame or the athletic hoyden.

Jack made no secret of his admiration, and paid court to his pretty cousin in an open and almost boyish fashion, which Mercy accepted with laughing good-fellowship. Hugh watched the pair with amused attention, and alert observation. There was nothing as yet, he decided, dangerous about Dunmow. Everything was open and frank and brotherly. Mercy was absolutely heart-whole so far. At this moment her mind was unfolding in a new atmosphere, and absorbing a great variety of new impressions and experiences.

Later on these impressions would be set in order and analysed. And no doubt in due time both Jack and himself would be passed under review, and set each in his own place. But what that place would be Mercy herself could not now have told, and of this fact Hugh was sufficiently aware.

When they were in their seats again, during a break in the game, he asked her a question.

"Will you find it dull at Quentin Easter, after the dissipations of your London season?"

She turned an amused gaze upon him, which recalled the face of the child Mercy when he had said something very boyish, and she was taking the superior air of the tolerant girl instructor.

"I am never dull at home. There is far too much to do; and there will be more after I come of age. For you know grandfather taught me a great deal, and there are plans of his which I must try to carry out. And there is a good deal to do for grandmother too. And I have my friends—and the animals. . . ."

"Yes, I put my question badly. It is not dullness you will suffer from; but rather a plethora of occupations. Won't you want somebody to help you, Mercy?"

He steadily kept the note of tenderness out of his voice. It would have been such a natural and delightful thing to have proffered his own services as her aide-de-camp. But it would not do—yet. Only in one way could he so propose himself, and plainly the idea of such a coadjutor had never occurred to her. Yet there was a responsive look in her eyes as she turned them upon him.

"I have been thinking about that, Hugh."

"Yes? Well, what have you been thinking?"

"May I tell you? I should rather like some advice. Of course it must be for granny to decide really. But if the idea were foolish, I might not even suggest it. Yet for some things it would be very nice."

"Tell me the idea, Mercy."

"Hugh, did you ever see Alys Ainsley at Quentin Easter?"

134 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"The pretty little dark-eyed girl whom you brought there once or twice for the holidays? Oh yes, I remember her quite well. I had rather a *tendresse* for her for a few weeks once, I think."

"Poor little Alys! So few people seem to have any tenderness for her! She has a hard life. I saw her yesterday. She is not at all happy. I shall have her to my birthday party at Quentin Easter. But Hugh—I cannot help thinking about her—and how to help her more. I was wondering whether—when I get settled at home—I could have her there to help me. Granny wants reading to a good deal; and there are the flowers and the animals and letters and so many little things. A sort of sister-companion might be very useful. But then I see difficulties. Alys would soon grow very dependent; and she has no relations of her own whom she cares for, or who care for her. Grandmother explained something of that before, and the danger there was sometimes in taking over too much responsibility with respect to another life. And yet . . ."

"I see what you mean. Old Aunt Sarah is quite right. A lot of mischief can be done that way. But I understand how you feel towards little Miss Alys Ainsley. One wanted to protect and shelter her—I remember that quite well."

"Oh, Hughie, how nice of you to remember! Well, you will better understand and help me with your advice. I want to be wise; but when one has so much—so very much—oneself, and there is somebody else who has so little, and is so tired and sad and wistful . . . and she has been put in your path, as it were—perhaps for a purpose. . . . One never quite knows. . . . But I have a feeling that things are ordered like that for one. . . ."

Mercy's face flushed and quivered, and Hugh felt a great longing to take her into his arms and kiss the sweet eyes which were bright as with a glint of unshed tears. But this being out of the question, he simply laid his strong firm hand upon hers and said in a pleasant, kindly but matter-of-fact tone:

"I think I know exactly what you mean—the Divinity

which shapes our ends—as Shakespeare aptly put it. Well, one need not be ashamed of that feeling. How would it be when she comes to Quentin Easter, for the birthday week, to see how Lady Sarah takes to her again? Then in August come the summer holidays: how would it work out to ask her down for those, without a word of anything more drastic? She could help you, read to grandmother, and all that sort of thing. Then later on, if it seemed as though you wanted companionship in the house, why, it would be quite natural for you to say: 'What about little Alys? She has to do something for her living. Why should we not have her here as a sort of companion for me, and reader for you?' What do you think of that for a scheme?"

"Oh, Hugh, I think it's quite beautiful! After all, boys can have ideas! Do you remember the days when I used to think that boys only *did* the things that the girls thought of for them?"

And then they plunged into reminiscences of the golden days of the past, and there was a happy shining in Mercy's eyes as she was driven home in the evening glow, which caused her cousins to exchange glances, and whisper to one another that Hugh must have been "going it," and that Jack must have his innings now!

Jack seemed nothing loth. He had Sunday to spend at home, and what more natural than that he should devote himself to the entertainment and instruction of his pretty cousin, who was so new to London and its many and varied sights and experiences?

But Mercy was quite firm and deliciously "Mid-Victorian," as Molly and Sally were eager to inform her, Mercy fitting on the cap with perfect readiness and appreciation.

"The Queen (I can't think of anybody else yet by that name) has always been my ideal. She stands as a model for every woman in her empire. I'm glad if I am like her, or the people of her reign. I don't want to see sights on Sunday, or go to what you call church parade, or see pictures, or go to At Homes in fashionable houses. I want to go to Westminster Abbey in the morning, and St

136 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

Paul's in the afternoon, and to stay at home in the evening. But I am quite, quite happy to do these things alone."

"It's exactly what I should like myself!" cried Jack. "I'll take you along, Mercy. You mightn't think it, but church music when it's good fetches me tremendously. And I rather like the feel of grey old hoary walls about me, or great spaces, like the dome of St Paul's. Westminster Abbey is no good. Still boarded up, except a chapel or so, for the Coronation. All the same we'll have a good old orgy of church music and ecclesiasticism, you and I. Sally can come if she likes."

Sally did come, being advised thereto by a glance from her mother. But Sally was no drawback to Jack's courtship of Mercy, as she always picked up friends wherever she went, and when there was any walking round to be done, she had her own partner and cicerone. Mercy, being quite innocent of Jack's secret and increasing admiration, enjoyed the music and the grand buildings to her heart's content, whilst he enjoyed the contemplation of her grave sweet face, and the monopoly of her society after the service, his satisfaction being only broken in upon once by an incident which was a very agreeable one to Mercy.

It happened after the close of Evensong at St Paul's, whilst the congregation streamed out, and Mercy sat entranced by the rolling tones of the grand organ played by a master hand.

Jack was content enough to sit beside her and listen, and the crowd had considerably melted away before they rose to leave.

Then suddenly Mercy gripped his arm.

"Oh, look, look, Jack! There is Mr Earle! I'm sure it is he! Oh, I should like so much to speak to him!"

Mercy had recognised the tall strongly-built clerical figure and the set of the head with its crisply curling hair; but for a moment when the face was turned in her direction she hesitated.

Could this bronzed parson with the thin face and finely chiselled features ever have provoked the epithet of "suck-ing-pig" or cherubim? And yet the features were really

the same, only so much more hollow, virile and strong. She went straight up to him and asked :

‘ Mr Earle, do you remember me ? ’

For a moment he paused in uncertainty and doubt. Then the upturned face smiled, and instantly he exclaimed :

“ Little Mercy ! ”

In a moment they were deep in reminiscence, question and response. Jack was forgotten, and stood by listening, taking stock of a man of whom he had heard a good deal, and all in his favour, though at this moment he felt a little aggrieved and savage.

As he walked away at last with Mercy, he let fly a remark which in cooler moments he would have held back.

“ Now, Mercy, whatever you do, don’t go and marry a beggarly parson. They are always on the warpath for rich wives, you know.”

Mercy answered not a word ; but she turned her head and looked at him, and Jack felt exactly as though he had made a sorry ass of himself—and that Mercy knew it, but was too kind to tell him so.

CHAPTER XXII

ANOTHER ENCOUNTER

It was at a large dance—the grandest which Mercy had attended in any other house than her uncle's—that this second encounter took place.

Her partner had led her out to have an ice, and she was standing in a corner whilst he fetched it, when a voice at her side, deep and resonant, caused her an odd little start, as does any sound which seems to come out of the past, to arouse a crowd of half-forgotten memories.

"Miss Quentin . . . am I forgotten?"

She turned quickly. She looked up into a dark, stern, deeply-lined face, lighted by gloomy brooding eyes behind which fires seemed to smoulder.

He was not greatly changed: he scarcely looked, to her, much older than in those days when Colin used to quail before him, and Mercy had need to summon up all her courage so that she might not show her fear. Indeed these memories were so vivid that something like a qualm of fear gripped at her heart-strings now; and the consciousness that this was so caused her suddenly to laugh.

Mercy's laugh was singularly sweet, a rippling sound of spontaneous mirth was in its tones. Few heard it without a wish to join. And the gloomy eyes kindled.

"Captain Dare! I should never have expected to meet you here!"

"Is that why you laugh? Where do you expect to meet me then?"

"Ah, well, if I were up at the North Pole, or in some Indian jungle full of tigers; or on the crater edge of any erupting volcano—then it would seem quite natural for Captain Dare to walk up and give me a hand. But a dance

—in the heart of Mayfair—no ; somehow that seems incongruous ! ”

“ Do you know why I am here ? ”

“ Perhaps because you were asked ! ”

“ If I had not been asked and I wished to come—I should have been here all the same. I came to meet a single person. Her name is Mercy Quentin ! ”

“ That was kind of you. I am very glad to see you again. Can you tell me anything about Colin ? ”

“ Colin is in South Africa. ”

“ But everybody is coming home now. Won't he come back with his regiment—whatever it is ? ”

“ He went out as a free lance, and joined there. Now he is on his own hook again. He seems to be fascinated by the country, like so many more. He may settle there altogether. ”

“ Without coming home ! Oh, I hope not ! ”

The dark eyes searched her face intently.

“ You have not forgotten Colin then ? ”

“ Of course not. We were friends for two whole years. And Private Muggs is still alive, only we call him General now. I promised he should be alive when Colin came home. I would like them to meet again. And dogs do not live so very long. ”

The dark-browed man, strong and lean and muscular, towering above the dapper youngsters hurrying to and fro with ices, as a great hound towers amongst poodles and lap-dogs, was attracting some considerable amount of attention. He looked so different from the surroundings in which he had placed himself. Mercy, now supplied with her ice, felt this. Captain Dare leaned back against the wall, and surveyed her from his stately height. When her next partner came hastening up to claim her, he calmly interposed.

“ I am going to dance this next dance with Miss Quentin. I am sorry to interfere with existing arrangements ; but I am here with this intention, and you will have to give her up to me. I will give you whatever satisfaction you demand later. Any friend of yours can wait upon me

140 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

to-morrow. Captain Dare at the Savoy." And leaving the astonished youngster staring at him in mute astonishment, the bronzed man led Mercy away, her little ripple of laughter falling pleasantly upon his ears.

"I take it for granted you do not object. An old friend is not a bad exchange for a new, eh?"

She glanced up at him, without coquetry, with that direct questioning child-glance that brought the past so vividly back to him, when the little yellow-haired lassie, who had defied and scolded him on the first occasion of their meeting, refused to be quenched, or to cringe before him, and inspired him with a certain admiration and respect.

"You are such a very masterful and overpowering old friend," she answered. "Were you inviting that poor youth to fight a duel to-morrow? It sounded rather like it!"

"That is as he pleases. I am ready! I think it a thousand pities that gentlemen cannot settle their disputes in that fashion, as in the good old days before we were emasculated by humanitarianism. I've lived in plenty of places where the knife or the pistol is the final argument in cases of dispute. And really it answers well. Also in countries like that the men are men—not elegant puppies and mountebanks!"

"I think our English boys showed that they could fight when the need came," said Mercy quietly, but with a gleam in her eyes which he saw and recognised.

"True; this war woke up the sleepy old country. The question is, will she keep awake? A boom is often followed by a slump. And how are you bringing up your boys in school? Will they take a licking? No fear! They go whining home to mammy, and up comes the schoolmaster for assault! Bah, it makes me sick! Was any Dare ever brought up that fashion, or any man worth his salt? You thought I was a brute to Colin once on a time. But if the kid was thrashed then, it turned him into a man. You don't bring up men on coaxing and caresses and reasonable argument. The mailed fist, falling true, that's what the boy wants; and the nation too, when things come to a

certain pass. You'd best look out over here that the mailed fist doesn't fall on your soft, pampered hide, and leave you gasping and howling for mercy ! ”

How well Mercy remembered the tones of that big, threatening voice, which used to bewilder and enrage Colin, and leave her with curious sensations as though she hated the speaker, and yet felt that in his speech there was something true enough to leave a sting behind. His dancing was like his talking ; it carried you off your feet, almost ; yet there was something so strong and virile about it, that it was a fascinating and almost bewildering experience.

They scarcely paused till the music stopped, and by chance they came to a halt in the close proximity of Lady Parminster, who rose and approached Mercy, having heard the name of her partner.

Mercy presented him, and he bowed with the ease of perfect self-assurance.

“ Miss Quentin and I are friends of long standing. It is an acquaintance I hope to renew to good purpose in the near future. I am going down to the House of Dare next week.”

“ Then you will be at home for my coming of age,” said the girl. “ I used to wonder whether Colin would come back for that.”

“ You never wondered about me, I suppose ? ”

She smiled and shook her head.

“ Colin was my friend,” she said.

“ Then I must learn to take his place.”

“ You seem rather an adept at taking other people's places,” spoke Mercy, with light in her eyes.

Then she was claimed once more, and Lady Parminster engaged Captain Dare in conversation. She found him an interesting personage, a great traveller, who seemed equally familiar with every quarter of the globe. He had served in the war for a short time, but so soon as the real peril and crisis was over he had betaken himself elsewhere. A rolling stone obviously, and with perhaps not too clean a record ; but a man of parts and individuality, who would make his personality felt in any company.

142 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"Was that Dare you were dancing with, Mercy?" Hugh asked, as he led her away.

"Yes, do you know him?"

"I remember him at your seven-year-old party, and I think I saw him once after that. He's been in town once or twice lately. He belongs to the Travellers' Club. I once dined at the same table with him. Nobody seems to know much about him."

"He is too much on the wander for that. Hugh, I don't think I like him. Something repels me—just as it did when I was a child. I do not think I am glad that he will be at the House of Dare when I go home."

Hugh felt a secret sense of satisfaction at Mercy's words.

"It may be just as well not to have too much liking for a man of that type. His story may have unpleasant episodes in it. Mercy, what are you thinking about?"

She lifted troubled eyes to his.

"I was thinking about Alys, Hughie."

He loved it when the old caressing name passed her lips. He drew her away out of the stream of dancers into a little alcove, where they were practically alone.

"What in the world has Alys—Miss Ainsley, I must learn to call her—got to do with it?"

"She admires Captain Dare very much; and she knows him just a very little." Rapidly Mercy sketched the very slight story of their acquaintance. "Do you see what I mean, Hugh? They will meet at Quentin Easter; and Alys—she is such a romantic little thing—and he seems like a hero of romance to her. And yet—if he is not—you know what I mean. And if he should play with her..."

"Now, look here," said Hugh, in that elder-brotherly fashion of his which at this moment was very grateful to Mercy, "I don't see why you need bother yourself over trifles. The House of Dare is five miles off. Your birthday party only lasts from Friday till Wednesday, after which we all come back again. Dare won't be likely to be over more than once, or at most twice, during that time. He'll scarcely more than just speak to Alys; and if it will be any satisfaction to you, Mercy, I'll mount guard over

her, and make myself agreeable, and take care that Dare doesn't monopolise her or turn her head in any way. Long before August he'll be off again. He has some property or some business in Sicily, I'm told, that takes him away a lot. He's only here on some matter connected with the Dare estate, and when it is settled back he goes. He never cares to be long in England, and the House of Dare must be pretty well a ruin by now, or at least an uninhabitable shell of a place."

Mercy's brow cleared, and her eyes looked her gratitude.

"Oh, if you will help me, Hugh, that will make everything right. It would be so sad if by coming to Quentin Easter poor little Alys got into any more trouble and distress. Fancy falling in love with a man like Captain Dare!"

Hugh felt his heart leap.

"Yet some women might—he's a handsome chap."

Mercy slightly shook her head.

"It is not a face one could trust," she said.

CHAPTER XXIII

MERCY'S GUESTS

MERCY had petitioned to return home one day in advance of the family gathering, and to bring her two school friends, Alys and Joyce, with her.

Her own relatives were brimful of engagements, and none of them could leave town before Friday afternoon or Saturday. But Mercy felt to be *aching* for the peace and restful silence of Quentin Easter. She wanted time to visit her old haunts, to chat with Miss Marjoribanks, to renew friendly relations with all the animals upon the place, and to enjoy a breathing space before the commotion of the great house-party began. For this house-party gathered as her guests. For the first time in her life Mercy would have to play the part of hostess. Lady Sarah would be there to give her support and countenance. But since the death of her husband, Mercy's grandmother had aged with great rapidity. She bore the loss of her youngest son with an amazing fortitude, as one holding up under a crushing blow for the sake of another who is more sorely hurt. But after the death of her life's partner, such motive seemed withdrawn, and from that time forward a rapid change was visible in the erstwhile so stately and active old lady.

She grew silent and dreamy ; gentler in her manner, more dependent and more tender. Not that she lost grip of any of her faculties, or of that excellent judgment for which she had been renowned. She sent Mercy away from her, though the girl would fain have remained, in order that she should pass through one of these needful phases of her development, and make those experiences which her forbears had made before her. Mercy very well knew that

after these celebrations at Quentin Easter, which would mark her own assumption of womanhood and legal responsibility, she would be sent back to finish her London season, and that, later on, her presentation at Court, however little she might care for that honour, would take place as a matter of course. Her grandmother would suffer her to shirk nothing of these duties, however much she might miss her companionship at home. But afterwards—Mercy's heart swelled with joy and exultation at this thought—she would be free to mould her life, and live it at Quentin Easter without let or hindrance. All these periods of absence—these necessary breaks in the happy home life—would soon be at an end. The voice of home was wooing her, and it came to her charged with new meanings. Her position there would be a different one now. From being the guarded child of the house she would rise to the post of its mistress. If there was exultation in that thought, there was a deep sense of responsibility also: and when Mercy thought of the future and what it held for her, a sweet and serious gravity looked out from her eager, happy eyes. Like the child of old she often clasped her hands and whispered:

"Let me be good—let me only be good!"

And now she was going home on the eve of this anniversary which was to mark an epoch in her life—and she was going alone, so far as her kinsfolk were concerned.

But Joyce and Alys were awaiting her at Paddington. And it was good so see the shining in the soft eyes of little Alys, and to suffer the bear-like hug of Joyce's strong arms.

Mercy had insisted the previous week on a shopping expedition, during which she had played the part of fairy godmother to the companions who owned but little of this world's wealth.

Alys accepted gifts with a clinging childlike gratitude which was very winning. But Joyce with a sturdy independence had struck a bargain. She was to paint the portrait of General Muggs. Mercy had never been satisfied with photographs; and Joyce had a real gift for animal portraiture. It was her first commission, and payment was

146 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

to be made in advance. Thus was the bargain struck ; and now Mercy looked at her two companions and their modest yet sufficient baggage with glances of satisfied admiration. She would have felt it " horrid " if their first visit to Quentin Easter *en fête* should be marred to them by a sense of insufficient and inappropriate equipment. When Alys had been there previously she had merely been a schoolgirl, and there had been no company in the house.

In the reserved railway carriage, where they all felt more or less like royal personages in their " special," they eagerly discussed the situation.

" Did Mrs Roby mind sparing you for a week, Alys ? "

" Oh, not much—not after you wrote ; only, only . . . "

" What, dear ? Did she make any conditions ? "

" Not exactly ; but she did say that she supposed my fine friends would be giving me a ticket to see something of the Coronation processions ; and that I might pass that on to her ! "

Alys was flushed, and Mercy could not help laughing. It was a peep behind the scenes for her into the ways and thoughts of a section of the community of which she had had no experience.

Joyce spoke rather hotly.

" And I suppose you were weak and silly enough to let her think you could give her a shove ; and when you find you can't, she will take it out of you ! "

" But I shall have had my week at Quentin Easter then," answered Alys, with heightened colour but shining eyes, " and nothing can take that away. Of course, I didn't promise anything. I only said—If."

Joyce shook her tawny head impatiently, and Mercy turned to Alys with a touch of that quiet dignity which she had inherited in large measure from those who had gone before.

" Mrs Roby shall certainly have a ticket. It has been kind of her to spare you to me. When I write to thank her I will enclose one. But it will not be yours, Alys."

The junction station at last !—then only a seven-mile

drive through the dear familiar country to the well-loved stately home. As the carriage swept onwards through the lovely leafy lanes, all decked with shimmering golden green, and scented with hawthorn and lilac, Mercy grew silent from very ecstasy of happiness. Joyce held her breath in speechless admiration of the vivid beauty of nature at the golden moment of summer's happy advent, and Alys lay back in luxurious ease against the soft cushions, and wished that this drive could go on for ever and ever, whirling her into some paradise of luxurious rest and beauty.

Here they passed the boundary of the property. Every cottage was Mercy's tenant, eagerly on the watch for the return of the carriage bringing "little Missie" home. How good it was to be loved like that! There was moisture as well as happy laughter in Mercy's eyes as she returned the salutations of the rustic folk.

Now the church tower loomed up; and here peeped out an ivy-covered gable—the Little Old House.

"Oh, stop, stop!" cried Mercy, springing up in her seat. "Oh, look, Joyce!—there is General Muggs at the gate—and my dear Miss Marjorie!"

Mercy was out of the carriage and in the arms of her dear old friend almost before the carriage had stopped, the great brindled dog pawing her rapturously and leaping up and down, his years forgotten, whilst he vented his joy in deep exultant throaty bays.

"Miss Marjorie, you will come up this evening—won't you? And you'll lend me darling Muggy for the days I am at home. Yes, you shall come in the carriage, sonny. We won't forget you are fourteen years old because you do not look it. Oh, Miss Marjorie, it is so good to be home again! I have ten thousand things to tell you; but I must get home to grandmother now."

The carriage drove away with four occupants now, and Joyce made rapturous love to her future sitter, from whom Alys drew a little away, half afraid for her pretty travelling dress, half in distaste of the big heavy-jowled dog, whom she remembered, but had never admired.

But ah! that happy home-coming! There had been

148 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

many others, but none quite like this ; for grandmother had never been alone before—save for the aunt who kept her company—and the welcome that Mercy received was characterised by some new depth of tenderness and meaning.

Joyce took Alys a "prowl" round the gardens whilst Mercy and her grandmother talked together. Then the stately old lady received them kindly ; Mercy showed them to the pretty rooms they were to occupy, near to her own quarters, and then they had tea out in the garden under a great spreading cedar, and Lady Sarah told them all the news of the place, and all the prospective arrangements for the celebrations of Mercy's majority, which would be kept upon the Monday, the first of June falling that year on Sunday.

Joyce had her sketch-book in her bag at her side, and before long her eager pencil was at work. She professed to be making studies of General Muggs, stretched in blissful contentment at Mercy's feet ; but before they rose from their seats she had a delicate little replica of Lady Sarah's fine, worn aristocratic face, and on a smaller scale a full-length drawing which showed her stately dignity of pose, and the o'd-world charm of her perfectly appropriate dress.

Mercy was enchanted, and when, in the long clear twilight after dinner, Miss Marjoribanks came up for the chat upon the terrace which had been promised before, the sketch-book was handed to her, and in the circle of light shed by the lamp which stood with the coffee equipage on the table, she turned the pages carefully one by one, and then looked with a smile across at Joyce, who having heard of Miss Marjoribanks before, and knowing the value of her artistic work, awaited the dicta with quivering eagerness and hope.

"My dear, do you know that you have a great talent ?"

"If I could only use it right, and had the patience to develop it in legitimate fashion !"

The artist laughed. She knew what Joyce meant. Some of those sketches showed the exuberance of imagination which sometimes leads its possessor astray.

"That very fear of misuse will help to keep your fancies within legitimate bounds. Imagination is a great gift; but all gifts must be used with restraint. Good servants may become bad masters, as the wise old proverb tells us."

"I'm so glad you tell me that! Such lots of people urge me to give my imagination full rein, and talk of restraint as though it would cripple . . ."

"I know, Joyce; that lack of restraint in everything about us is one of the signs of the times—and not a pretty or elevating one. Be thankful for that instinct in your own nature which warns you of the perils of an unbridled imagination."

Chin on hand Mercy listened to the talk which followed, as the child Mercy of old had listened when her elders discussed matters far above her comprehension. That quality of quiet observation and cogitative silence characterised the girl as it had done the child. To lay in a store of new ideas which would give food for future consideration and speculation was dear to Mercy's heart.

It was only when she remembered that Lady Sarah would be waking from her nap to find herself alone, that Mercy slipped away, and sitting at the old lady's feet told her all the news of the family, and described the gay doings she had witnessed and shared. Alys stole in presently, and in her soft and gentle flattering fashion told of Mercy's great goodness to her, and all the difference it had made.

She knew Lady Sarah a little, and though awed by her, and timid in her presence, made a better impression perhaps than she would have done had she been bolder or more self-assertive.

But Joyce and Miss Marjoribanks sat out in the moonlight and talked, and Mercy rejoiced to see that two beings whom she greatly loved seemed drawn from the first so strongly together.

CHAPTER XXIV

COMING OF AGE

ALL the Sunday, upon which Mercy attained her majority, joy-bells were ringing throughout the length and breadth of the land.

Peace was proclaimed at last—that peace so earnestly longed after. For though the dogs of war had been chained and silenced some while before, and the anxious strain relaxed, yet the mutterings of the dispersing storm had lingered long; and only with the dawn of "The Glorious First of June" could the pealing of the bells bring its message of joy to a great nation that has passed through many long dark hours of waiting and suspense.

It seemed to Mercy a very beautiful augury for that life now beginning for her: a life filled to the brim with interest and with responsibility, yet which might be lived in such a manner as to bring much happiness and sunshine into many homes, and become a power for justice and for peace in the midst of a wide region where the name of Quentin had been held in honour and esteem for many generations.

The house-party was a large one; and it resembled in many respects that which had assembled in honour of Mercy's seventh birthday, when the Squire Grandfather had announced his decision, and Mercy had been put in her father's place, as the next in succession to these great possessions and accompanying honours.

Some faces were missing, it is true. The old man himself was gone; and Roderick, the sailor son, whose voice would be heard no more here. Then some of the little cousins, now schoolboys and schoolgirls, were hindered by their studies from coming. Tommie and Dolly wrote long indignant letters to Mother Mercy—the indignation

being for those who kept them away from presenting their congratulations in person. Hugh's younger brother was in Canada, and the small sister Babs of old days had married young and was away in India. But Gem—or Jim—was very much on the spot, also Hugh, with his parents, and large contingents of Mainwaring relations.

Uncle Alec of course was much to the fore—the home uncle upon whom Mercy relied for counsel and support. As for Uncle Frank, he was accompanied now by a most charming young wife, an Aunt Diana, whom he had met and wedded in Italy, and who had a one-quarter strain of Italian blood, which seemed to give her an extra power of fascination and charm. Moreover these brought with them a very important little being—a baby Frank of three years old—an adorable little personage, to whom Mercy paid unceasing court, and who from the first made himself remarkably at home at Quentin Easter, as though he recognised in it the family home.

Also it was Mr Earle's first Sunday in his new parish as Rector. He had been warmly welcomed back by the parishioners, who remembered him well as Dr Ringer's curate. Many of the big lads of his curate days had enlisted in the ranks at the time of the war, and had met their one-time clergyman in the forefront of peril and danger. They brought back word of him to their homes when they returned, and his welcome had been cordial and sincere.

Mercy felt like one who dreams, as from her place beside her grandmother in the great family pew, which to-day overflowed into many others in its neighbourhood, she looked round upon the dear familiar building, hoary and beautiful, and at those rows of familiar faces which she had known and loved from infancy.

How good it was to see them all again! How beautiful this thrill of joy-bells in the air, which told of the blessings and the certainty of peace! How sweetly solemn the thought of the thing which came to her to-day; this step from protected childhood, into that realm of responsible womanhood, whose verge she had been treading for so long.

152 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

Here in the soft lights from the stained windows which made rainbow tints about her, with the tablets before her eyes bearing the honoured name, whose traditions and dignities she must now uphold, strange visions floated before the eyes of the girl Mercy; and as, later on she knelt at her grandmother's side upon the altar step, her head was bent very low in humble supplication and prayer; for she felt that only in a strength greater than her own could the life reaching out before her be adequately lived.

A very happy birthday truly. Mercy was glad that the real anniversary fell upon this Sunday of rejoicing; and that the festivities were reserved for the morrow. In the evening twilight, walking in the garden with her uncle the K.C., she asked him a question:

"Uncle Frank, do you remember a Sunday fourteen years ago, when you talked to me about the Queen, and Quentin Easter?"

He looked into the face of the girl, and caught the same serious light which had shone in the eyes of the little child; and he made a sign of assent.

"I shall have to be very good, Uncle Frank, if I am to follow grandfather—and those others." Then came a pause of pregnant silence, and she asked a question:

"Uncle Frank, ought I to make my will?"

He smiled; but he was a man of the law, and he knew the terms of his father's will. In one respect they were peculiar.

Quentin Easter was settled upon Mercy and her children. But, in the event of her having no child, she had power to will the place as she would. He had shifted upon her shoulders the decision as to the succession. For when that will was made none of the sons were married, and the ominous term of "confirmed bachelor" had begun to be bestowed upon them.

"Well, Mercy, I suppose you ought."

"It will be quite easy, Uncle Frank. I shall leave Quentin Easter to little Frankie. He comes next in the succession. You will let me love him and have him often here? He must grow up to love Quentin Easter as we all love it who live here."

"The little chap is welcome to love it as much as ever we can make him. But remember, Mercy, we must not put ideas into his small head. It will be a son of yours who will succeed you here, please God, when your time comes."

Mercy had walked to the end of the terrace, and now stood looking over the balustrade at the north-west angle. A shimmer of silver marked the lake, and the trill of the nightingale broke tentatively and with many pauses upon the scented silence of the night.

"I don't think so, Uncle Frank. I don't think that I shall ever marry."

"It is possible that you may not, Mercy. You will be a lady not easily pleased; and you will be right not easily to share the great trust which passes now into your hands. Yet all the same I hope and believe that the day will come when the right husband may appear, and when you will recognise the man who will be worthy to help you to reign here, and make the happiness of your life also."

"Yes, Uncle Frank, I know that it is possible; but I do not think it will be so. I cannot tell you why; but I have the feeling very strongly. Sometimes it seems to me as though marriage—even if I were very happy—perhaps *because* I might be so very happy—would limit and impoverish my life. I quite understand that in one way *that* love is the most beautiful of all. But I do not feel as though it would ever be for me. I cannot tell you more than that. If by-and-by—when baby Hughie grows bigger, and perhaps has another brother younger, you could spare me Frankie for my own, and let me adopt him . . ."

Then Uncle Frank laughed; and after a moment Mercy joined him. The humour of her own suggestion, made upon her twenty-first birthday, struck her in the light in which it might strike others. In the spontaneity of her laugh, her uncle lost the impression of her words. He was glad that Mercy was not a girl to be too quickly worked upon, too quickly wooed and won. He knew very well that she would have none of those cousins of hers, first or second, who were paying her open court through her first season. Mercy's mate must be of a different calibre, if ever he ap-

154 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

peared. But of course with the flight of years changes and chances would bring many a man within the radius of her personal charm. She could afford to wait. There was every reason why she should. Hasty matrimony was inadvisable from every standpoint, and so long as his own mother lived—well, it might be better for Mercy to be able to make her the first charge upon her time and care.

"But I shall make no will to-morrow, Uncle Frank," said Mercy, "and little Maude will be my heir."

The morrow was all that a birthday *fête* ought to be in the matter of weather. Again the joy-bells pealed forth. There was stir and gaiety throughout the region of Quentin Easter. Children crowned with flowers and bearing the spoils of the woods in their hands came to sing a birthday carol beneath Mercy's windows. There were feasting and games and sports. There was an ox roasted whole in the park. There were addresses from tenants and cottagers. There were presents and congratulations pouring in from neighbours and acquaintances throughout the whole of the day.

Mercy had to show herself again and again, to walk round the tents, to distribute prizes to hot and happy children.

She had guests of her own to thank and entertain, though the party invited to the house was restricted to near neighbours and intimate friends, on account of Lady Sarah's recent widowhood and failing strength.

But it was a beautiful memory for Mercy to cherish, the spontaneous affection of the whole community, their unfeigned loyalty to the House of Quentin, and the sympathetic fashion in which they showed it.

When other guests were leaving, after the garden gathering beneath the stately terrace, there was an arrival which caused a little sensation. Captain Dare appeared, and with him an immense dog, of a breed which no one present could define, something between bloodhound, mastiff and Great Dane. He held the dog by the collar as he approached Mercy, who stood at the foot of the terrace steps, speaking her gracious farewells to parting guests. And when she

was free she turned to him and held out a welcoming hand.

"Captain Dare! I thought you had forgotten your—threat or promise—which must I call it?"

"To come over to wish you well? Don't you know that I never forget—either promise or threat. Have you room for another present, either within doors or without?"

And as he asked the question he slipped a lead upon the great dog, and handed it to Mercy.

"I call him Kitchener, because he is big and masterful—will fight to a finish if wanted—not unless. Will you accept him, Miss Quentin? He is of no particular breed. I brought him from Sicily, and he is just out of quarantine. He is well trained, and will obey you at a word. I wanted to bring you something you would like, and of which you would not have too many replicas."

The huge dog was quietly sniffing at Mercy in canine fashion, but with great dignity and solemnity. When she put out a hand to him he laid his splendid muzzle in it, and heaved a sigh as of contentment. Then he deliberately sat down beside her, his head on a level with her waistband, and looked out at the world with eyes of unfathomable solemnity.

"That's all right. He is your dog for evermore," spoke Captain Dare; and suddenly turning his head his sombre eyes lit up. Mercy saw this and turned to look. Alys was coming down the steps, a fairy-like creature, with the evening light upon her, and her soft eyes all aglow with wonder and welcome.

Next minute her hand was in Captain Dare's possession, and the glow seemed to have spread and enveloped her whole personality.

CHAPTER XXV

DARE

It had not formed part of the programme ; but a man of strong will is wont to get his way. And so it came about that upon the Wednesday in "Mercy's Week," all the house-party from Quentin Easter, whose duties had not imperatively recalled them to town upon the previous day, found themselves at the House of Dare in the glow of a hot June afternoon.

The grim old house was softened by the glory of the sunshine, and by the wealth of flowering creeper and glossy ivy that mantled the grey old crumbling walls.

But it was not to be an indoor gathering. The shut-up and partly dismantled house offered no facilities for hospitality. Captain Dare, whose urgent invitation given two days ago had brought this gathering to his doors, received his guests in the gardens ; and truly the wilderness of fragrance and bloom deserved some of the admiration which the visitors accorded it.

Order there was not, save that the lawns had been mown, and the paths cleared of weeds, some clipping and pruning of redundant growth accomplished, together with the tying up of heavy masses of wistaria, Banksia rose or clematis. But the ancient pleasaunces, the winding shrubbery walks, the bowling-greens and the solemn fishponds were full of a quaint and shadowy charm that took an added beauty from the vivid shining of the blue sky overhead.

Captain Dare's face lighted when he saw the approach of Mercy, with the huge hound pacing stately at her side. The dog made no bounding movement towards himself ; nor had he evinced any excitement in being brought back to the place which for a short time had been his home. He

kept close to the side of his mistress, and surveyed the familiar scene with grave sombre glances.

"Quite your faithful henchman," quoth Captain Dare, as he held Mercy's hand. "It is said of these dogs that they only own allegiance to one. I did not wish that this one should attach himself to me—and I do not think he ever did. You have his heart already—and you will never lose it. That is your attribute, you know."

The man spoke with a certain significance; but Mercy appeared to be quite unconscious of the *double entendre* which his words might bear. Her hand was on the head of the great dog.

"I have changed his name," she said.

"He is yours to do with as you will."

"Kitchener is too long—and difficult to call." Mercy's face lit up with a little flickering smile: "I have called him Dare," she said.

"An excellent name for him," spoke her companion, with an odd flash in his eyes. "I shall like to feel that always you have a Dare beside you, and one who if need arose would dare all in your service."

Mercy smiled and passed on with her faithful companion at her side, who had not solicited any mark of recognition from his erstwhile master. This fact was observed by Mercy in subconscious fashion, and though she did not think of it at the moment, it recurred to her afterwards as something curious and significant.

Captain Dare had turned to Alys, who was a little behind.

"I said I would show you my house one day, and you thought I should not! What do you think of it now that you are here?"

Alys looked very lovely and very fragile, with the strong sunshine upon her, and her delicate little face flushing and paling with the tide of her quickly aroused emotions. She was all in white, and beneath the shadow of the picture hat—so simple yet so suited to her wild-rose beauty—her big soft eyes shone, and the smiles came and went upon her parted lips.

158 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"It looks like a house where strong men have lived," she said, "and have left their impress there."

"Good," he remarked; and standing beside her, his eyes swept the grim line of the battlements, and the long rows of windows too deeply set in the thick walls, and too much dimmed by time and dust, to shine any welcome. A frowning, solemn old house, yet softened by the rampant growth of tender living things, fresh and blooming.

"Strong men—and happy women?" he suggested, with a swift glance into her upturned face. "Is that the combination which suggests itself also. The happy, tender wife, clinging to her grim and stalwart husband. She standing for grace and fragility, he for power and resistance?"

"Yes, yes," spoke Alys eagerly, "it is like a fairy tale—or an old-world romance. The warrior knight going out to battle, and the arms of love encircling him, as though to hold him back!"

Then the sensitive colour suddenly flamed in her fair face; for this man of iron was looking down at her with a light in his eyes which she could not fathom. And for a moment her heart stood still, and then raced in a fashion which sent the blood ebbing back to its fountain-head.

She was glad that at that moment Captain Dare's attention was distracted by another arrival; and she, hastily turning, found herself in the pleasant company of Hugh Leigh, who had been very agreeable already.

Hugh came up smiling, and led her to the ancient sundial, the motto round whose edge they puzzled out together, he translating to her the crabbed Latin words. But it was she who found the other motto round the lower rim of the supporting pillar.

"He who dares nothing wins nothing."

Hugh laughed as they looked after the retreating form of their host.

"A good motto for the house of Dare!"

"Isn't it? And how splendid he is! Don't you think so, Mr Leigh? I did, the very first time I saw him, when I never guessed I should ever see him again. I know who he

was. Only in a way I knew him all the time." And Alys eagerly repeated the story of her first encounter with Captain Dare, and it was easy to see how great an impression these small incidents had made upon her, and how large they bulked in the mind of one whose life was so monotonous, restricted and starved.

No wonder that Mercy's compassion was aroused towards this fragile little creature, who seemed so little equal to the task of buffeting with the world. Hugh felt the protective instinct rising strong in his own heart. What a nuisance it was that convention hindered him from telling her that he would bring friendship and pleasure into her sordid, colourless life, would take her out to see gay sights, would act the part of a kindly elder brother! She would be a dear little thing to cherish and help; and they would both enjoy it so much. But it was impossible. Hugh recognised that without so much as debating the matter in his head. And Barbara was married and far away. His mother's life was a very full one, and she was not much in town. Besides, mothers were so suspicious where their sons were concerned; and Hugh could understand and sympathise in this. He had seen a good deal of life during the past years, living in chambers and extending his legal and social experiences every month. Fellows could make such a rotten mess of life—and generally it began over some girl.

"It would be so splendid," Alys was saying when he suddenly woke out of his reverie. "I could not help seeing it from the start. It is just exactly the sort of thing that ought to happen!"

"What is?" asked Hugh, wondering at the eager flush on the charming face, and the light in the liquid dark eyes.

"Why, that they should fall in love with one another—as I am almost sure they are doing already."

"Who?" asked Hugh, still at sea.

"Why, Mercy and Captain Dare, of course! Haven't you been listening? He has remembered her all these years, though she was quite a little child when he saw her last: and he brings her a great splendid dog, because he remembers how she loves all animals. And she calls the

160 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

dog Dare, because it is his gift. And he makes us all come to his house to-day, that he may get Mercy here too. And did you see his face when they met? I did. Oh, I always said that Mercy ought to marry a king amongst men—like Captain Dare!"

"Whew!" whistled Hugh, and his eyes followed the direction of his companion's. There, sure enough, was the tall, stalwart figure of their host, and at his side Mercy. True, there were others in the group; for Captain Dare was telling interesting stories of the traditions and legends which wrapped about his ancestral house; and he told them well. Mercy remembered this; for he had told these same tales to herself and Colin in the past, filling them with mingled joy and fear. Hugh and Alys drew somewhat nearer. Yes, Alys was right in one thing. Dare certainly was addressing himself to Mercy in a rather marked fashion. His eyes dwelt continually upon her face; he seemed to await the responsive answer from her eyes or lips. Once he put forth a hand, swiftly, almost fiercely, in the course of his narrative, in a telling gesture, which looked for the moment like a threat. A deep, fierce growl startled the company, and Mercy had suddenly to catch the great dog round the neck, or he would have seized the arm, if not the throat, of the man who had been his master. It was as though the great brute saw something in the action to stir his wrath—something menacing to his mistress's safety; and whilst Captain Dare laughed and applauded, and Mercy caressed and gently chid the dog, Hugh was conscious of a strong desire after the same liberty of action, and was conscious of some hot thrill of anger and revolt.

What a match it would be for any Dare! Those broad lands of Quentin Easter almost marched with his own diminished property. A little care, economy and management, and the whole intervening region might be theirs! A match that the world would applaud; and Dare, though a good twenty years Mercy's senior, had worn well. He had looked old as a young man, in middle life he looked young; for, though his face was deeply lined, his hair was scarcely touched by Time's hand, and his carriage was as

upright and youthful as that of a young man. The splendid Dare physique was his in full measure ; and if the Dares had not been a long-lived race, it was because they never died in their beds, but were lost amid the snows of the Andes, or in the torrid wastes of untrodden deserts, or fighting forces of nature in elemental fashion and savage places.

But Mercy ! Hugh looked at his cousin with quickened interest, and appreciation of her peculiar charm. Not the charm merely of beauty ; for Mercy's looks, though attractive enough, and instinct with a certain grace that defied definition, were not of that order which compels admiration and draws down universal plaudit. It was some peculiar characteristic of remoteness which differentiated her from the girls he habitually met in society, not a standing aloof from others by any conscious effort ; rather as though some aura of her own encompassed her, and set her at a little distance from her surroundings, whilst she breathed an atmosphere more pure and clear than that of the world through which she moved.

Hugh was aware of this attraction, and realised that a man like Captain Dare might well be conscious of it too, and attracted by it more powerfully perhaps than he would understand.

As he approached the group before the house he saw that Joyce's pencil was at work, and he stepped towards her, whilst Alys glided up to Mercy, to be received with a sweet smile.

Joyce had drawn the two eager faces with a consummate skill. In the man's blazing glance eager desire and worship. Upon the face of Mercy that peculiar directness and purity of outlook which so often took the breath of those who spoke with her, and arrested the words they were about to utter.

" You are a genius ! " exclaimed Hugh, as he took the book from Joyce, and looked earnestly at it. " You might spare me that sketch of Mercy."

" By-and-by, when I have done with it. But I want a lot of studies myself. I am going to paint her portrait, you know. I want it to be *the* picture of the Academy next year ! "

" By George, and you'll get your wish, I believe ! Miss

162 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

Trevlyn, is that the first time you have drawn that fellow Dare ? ”

“ No ; I drew his face long ago, when I saw him in the hunting field.”

“ You have given him a cruel mouth under that moustache.”

“ I have given him what he has got. His is a cruel face—if I did not know Mercy so well I might be frightened for her. He is a man who will fight hard.”

“ You mean . . . ”

“ That he wants her . . . that he means to have her. But I do not think he will. Do you ? ”

“ God forbid ! ” suddenly spoke Hugh, and then turned and walked away, half ashamed, Englishman-like, of having showed any stress of feeling.

But in his ears the words still rang :

“ He who dares nothing wins nothing.”

And all the Dares were men of daring.

CHAPTER XXVI

SUMMER PICTURES

Mercy's house-party had melted away ; but Mercy herself, with Alys and Joyce, remained for just a few more days.

" I will be good, granny," she had promised. " I will go back and finish my season, and enjoy it, and bring you home such lots of Coronation stories that we shall scarcely have time to get through them all ! But as I am here—and it is so lovely—and we are all so happy together . . . "

The bright or wistful eyes of the other pair, as Mercy boldly presented her petition, gave it added force ; and the old lady was only too happy when she had her granddaughter once more beside her. Though Lady Sarah would not say it yet, she missed Mercy's sunny presence in the house more than she had thought possible. She missed her as she never would have missed a noisy, high-spirited, laughing girl. For to her it was as though the brightness of the day was overcast and withdrawn, and a little nip of winter had stolen into the air—till Mercy came back.

So Mercy wrote to Mrs Roby on behalf of Alys, and received gracious response. Joyce was more independent ; it only meant the sacrifice of a lesson or two ; and, as she enthusiastically told Mercy, she was learning more from Miss Marjoribanks than she would do in the art school in London.

Joyce was in the rapture of a healthy hero-worship, with Miss Marjoribanks for its object. Every day she ran across to the Little Old House, and worked hard at the portrait of the brindled dog, who accompanied her to and fro. General Muggs was almost more at home here than at Quentin Easter, having been " Miss Marjorie's " charge

164 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

and faithful companion through all the frequent absences of Mercy during recent years. His adoring love for his young mistress always reawakened upon each of her home-comings; but the restful quiet of the smaller house in some ways better suited his advancing years. And the advent of Dare, though philosophically accepted, marked a difference in his canine life. He felt that his young mistress was adequately guarded and attended. He and the big hound seemed to hold conferences upon this point in solemn conclave. Then the General would trot off with Joyce to the Little Old House, and pose with exemplary patience and good temper for that commission picture which was growing rapidly beneath the clever fingers of the young artist.

Miss Marjoribanks had a studio now, built out in the garden, where she loved to work all through the warm summertide. This addition had been made soon after the death of the old mother, when a larger liberty and somewhat larger means enabled the daughter to launch out into some small "extravagances." Round the studio walls were flower subjects, which Joyce studied with ever-increasing delight, asking questions innumerable, dashing upon paper her own attempts at reproduction, and wringing her hands in mock despair when she found herself so utterly incompetent to attain that delicate luminosity of atmosphere or richness of colouring which was the characteristic and hall-mark of Miss Marjoribanks' work.

Then the older artist would laugh, laying a hand on the girl's bright head.

"Be content with your own share, child—which is a very big one. Your gift is a much larger one than mine! And if you cannot obtain effects in days which I have been decades in acquiring, there is no need to tear your hair and fling about your poor, defenceless brushes! Go on with your excellent portrait of General Muggs, and throw every bit of your powers of portraiture into your task! The secret of success is never to be satisfied with second-best. Whatever your hands find to do—do it with your might!"

Happy, sunny days of golden June!

The portrait of the brindled dog stared out from the

canvas with a lifelike friendliness which enraptured Mercy. She felt as though in some sort it was her beloved Captain Muggs into whose faithful face she was looking; and as Joyce worked, and Miss Marjorie's clever fingers hovered over her pencils and paint brushes, and Alys lay along the rug, with cushions beneath her head, in the luxury of blissful idleness, Mercy would recall the incidents of her childhood, and her old-time companions; and the name of Colin was often on her lips.

"Is he like Captain Dare?" Alys asked one day.

"I can't tell. He had the Dare features, as people used to call them; but he was only ten years old when he went away; and I have never seen him again. I would like Colin to come back. I want him to see General Muggs again. I thought he would be sure to come as soon as he was of age, and could do as he liked. But he is away in South Africa still. Captain Dare does not seem to know much about him. He was his guardian once; but that stopped nearly two years ago. I am not sure that he has heard from Colin since."

"Don't they like each other?" asked Joyce.

"I do not know. When Colin was a little boy he used to be afraid of Captain Dare; sometimes he hated him; but then when he was kind everything changed, and he would want to go everywhere with him, and follow him like a shadow. You never could tell . . ."

Mercy repeated almost unconsciously the child Colin's phrase concerning his kinsman and guardian. Alys, watching her with eager, ardent eyes, saw that kindling of the expression which she interpreted her own way.

"I know what you mean," she said, in a low voice. "With a man like that you never could tell. That makes the power of his fascination. It is like watching a lion-tamer in the midst of his beasts. There are forces which you cannot reckon upon. It is fearful, wonderful. You feel it all through you. . . ."

Joyce looked up and swept Alys with one of her flashing glances.

"Which is Captain Dare?—the lions or their tamer?"

166 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"Both," answered Alys promptly, and at that word Miss Marjorie bestowed a rather long and searching glance upon the flushed face and sparkling eyes of the girl. It seemed to her that when Captain Dare was under discussion Alys displayed an interest and an intuition somewhat in excess of any which she evinced upon other occasions.

Those were very happy, sunny days; and the portrait of the brindled dog was not the only work which Joyce accomplished in that brief visit. Miss Marjorie's garden and studio furnished her with many attractive subjects, and her dexterity of touch and power of rapid and lifelike delineation was stimulated by association with the mistress of the domain.

One day it would be a portrait of Mercy, with the great solemn hound at her side, leaning against a slender blossoming tree, with the sunshine all around her. Sometimes it was the head of Miss Marjorie herself, with its crisp silvery curls clustering round the fine brow; the grave, direct, yet subtly humorous gaze, and that little twist of the well-formed lips which gave such piquancy to the expression. Or it would be the long black-garbed form of Mr. Earle, looking down at Alys in a chivalrous and protective manner, as though her weakness made some appeal to him, and he felt that such a clinging dependent nature stood in need of protection and safeguarding.

Mr. Earle, being adoptive nephew to Miss Marjorie—he was not in point of fact quite so nearly related—came frequently to the Little Old House, which was not much more than a bow-shot from the Rectory gates. She aided him with practical advice, and was one of his most constant attendants at daily service. And so it was natural that, as he passed her gate on his way to and fro to his outlying parishioners, he should step in to speak with her, and be led to tell tales of the campaign to eager listeners, or retail anecdotes of individual "Tommies," which often left his listeners with an odd constriction of the throat. For Lionel Earle was a good raconteur, and had seen strange things and observed many deeds of quiet heroism out upon the wide veldt, or within hospital tents.

Alys listened very eagerly to his tales, for she had faint yet cherished hopes of some day freeing herself from the bonds of her uncongenial toil by means of a small literary gift which she possessed. She had made a few odd guineas by her little efforts, and the weaving of romances in her head was a constant occupation. If only she could make enough to keep herself without the toil of daily teaching, how delicious it would be! And in these sweet and stimulating surroundings romantic dreamings were easy, and subjects seemed to suggest themselves in radiant and attractive guise.

They were all sorry for her; they were all tender towards her; for she looked very fragile, and her wistful eyes spoke of many unfulfilled longings. They called her "poor little Alys" amongst themselves, and each thought how to befriend her, yet scarcely saw the way clearly enough.

Alys loved to make herself useful at Quentin Easter, and as Mercy was often taken up this week by visits from lawyers, and other matters claiming her attention, Alys would ask leave to read the papers to Lady Sarah, and her sweet voice and delicately clear enunciation were pleasant to the old lady's ears.

"I read so much to father," Alys told her once, "and he was very particular. He had been a teacher of elocution, as well as of many other things. I have always loved reading aloud: it seems to bring back those happy years—when we were always together."

Joyce made one of her characteristic sketches of Lady Sarah in her carved high-backed chair, and Alys sitting at her feet reading out of a great book. The big hound lay stretched in the foreground in a shaft of sunlight, and the picture was so charming to Mercy that she insisted upon purchasing it on the spot.

Lady Sarah was also pleased. If Joyce had not Miss Marjoribanks' gift for atmosphere, she had caught something of the sunny glow of the shaded room, and the dignity and stateliness of the panelled walls. The old lady had come to like both these girls, and when she heard that Joyce was to spend the holiday month at the Little Old

168 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

House, she put a kindly hand forth and laid it on the head of Alys, sitting at her feet.

"Then suppose you come to Quentin Easter, my love, and be my reader and amanuensis. Mercy will have a good deal now upon her hands; and if you are willing to take a holiday engagement . . ."

Alys had no need to reply in words; her shining eyes held her answer. Mercy came forward with a glad face and kissed her grandmother fondly. The favour she had meant to crave had been offered without prompting. Joyce, metaphorically speaking, flung her cap in the air.

"We'll divide the loot, Alys," she said, meaning Mercy's guineas for the water-colour sketch, "and we'll come down together and have a thundering good time. Hats off for Lady Sarah Quentin!"

CHAPTER XXVII

GOD SAVE THE KING

BACK into the gay whirl of the brilliant crowded heart of England! Mercy was almost whirled off her feet during the days which followed.

Thankful she was for the breathing space at home; for there was little time to pause for breath now!

"Going the pace, Mercy?" spoke Hugh at her elbow, as they met in a crush at one of the embassies; and she turned to him with a kindling light in her eyes which was enough to set his pulses hammering.

"Oh, Hugh, I am so glad to see you! I've got lost in the crowd! I mean I am separated from Aunt Parminster. It's all very interesting; but I want to know who the people are. I never saw such jewels, nor so many men in uniform or in orders. Do tell me who they all are! Grandmother will be so interested. It is like the things she did when she was young. If it were not so fearfully hot I should be enjoying every moment of it!"

"Come along. I'll find you a cool spot somewhere, and show you the big-wigs one by one. You don't often get so many together at once. And let me tell you, Mercy, that you have the air of a real tip-topper yourself to-night! Only you will always be yourself through every disguise!"

She laughed in that spontaneous fashion which drew many glances to the pure, flower-like face and sparkling eyes where woodland sunbeams seemed to stray. Hugh was quite right. Mercy carried about with her something of the atmosphere in which she had grown up. Although her dress was of the costliest, and fashioned by experts, and her jewels, not too numerous, drew the eyes of connoisseurs as she passed along, yet she was still Mercy, un-

170 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

spoilt and fresh ; and if those sweetly sparkling or sweetly grave eyes had learned to discern more clearly of the good and evil about her, it was not because her hand had been stretched out to take of the forbidden fruit.

Hugh felt that many envious eyes followed him as he piloted his companion to a coign of vantage in a window alcove raised by two steps above the floor of the high and glittering reception-room, crowded with beauty, fashion and celebrity.

"Hullo, you two!" spoke a familiar voice, and from behind a curtain emerged Jim Maltby, with his whimsical face, round sleek head, and the gimlet eyes of the man of practical ideas.

"Oh, Jim, how nice to find you here too! Are you inventing a new way of ventilating London crushes! I wish you would!"

"Good thought, I will! You were always a dab hand at giving me wrinkles. Do you remember the mouse trap I invented, warranted to let the mouse escape if he got too frightened? That was your stipulation, if you remember, and we thought it a very good one, I believe. But I've never sold my patent for that particular trap yet!"

"How did you get in here to-night, old chap?" asked Hugh. "I'm here to represent my governor, who couldn't be in two places at once. Aren't you a bit young for such functions as these?"

"Oh, I got my own invite all right," quoth Jim negligently. "I've got a card up my sleeve . . . naval guns . . . quick-firing . . . dead secret of course. The big-wigs are smiling upon me indulgently, but benignly. We don't talk of these little secrets; but I put in some of my time at the Admiralty; and I get my cards for these little shows all right."

Mercy's face showed her eager interest and appreciation.

"We won't make him vainer than he is, Hughie; but he is rather a clever boy, don't you think? Now tell me, both of you, who everybody is! Of course I know a great many; but the foreign celebrities I don't recognise—except one or two here and there."

They gave her the names and brief facts to recall them to

her memory. It was a brilliant shifting throng on which she gazed. Then suddenly she picked out a face she had not expected to see.

"Why, there is Captain Dare!" she exclaimed.

Hugh slightly frowned. He saw that this man was slowly making his way towards them. It would be a matter of time to reach their coign of vantage. But Dare would do it.

"That fellow is ubiquitous!" he muttered. "It's my belief he gets in half the times without any invitation. What's he done anyway to be here to-night? I'd like to see his card!"

Jim Maltby laughed.

"The motto of his house. He who dares nothing wins nothing. He's coming our way too."

"Trust him for that," muttered Hugh under his breath; and his eyes fixed upon Mercy's face.

She watched Captain Dare's slow progress with quiet equanimity. There was no rise of colour in her cheek, no eagerness in her glance; and the smile with which she greeted him held nothing, so far as he could see, save ordinary friendliness, and the welcome which Mercy always had for any of those who belonged to the life of Quentin Easter. Yet for all that Hugh was conscious of a quick stirring of hot and jealous young blood.

The Captain came up and stood beside them, taking Mercy's hand with a certain *empressement*.

"My greetings to the mistress of Dare!" he said.

Hugh's face was dark and unresponsive; but no one was looking at him, and Mercy understood one at least of the meanings of that greeting, and her smile was free and bright.

"Do you know that Dare has worked a great wonder? My grandmother would never before permit any dog inside the house, except when I was there to be responsible for him; and then he was only supposed to be in the hall, or in my rooms with me. But since Dare has come, he has been given the freedom of the whole house. If ever he cannot be with me, he is with her, watching over her and keeping guard. And she likes the feel of his presence. She is glad to have him whilst I am away in London."

172 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"That office will suit him well. It is the nature of those dogs to be always on guard."

"At first I wondered how I could leave him ; but when I began to show him that he must take care also of grandmother, it was much easier. I am glad for both of them. And when my portrait is painted by Miss Trevlyn, Dare is going to be painted with me."

"That is right. Dare and his mistress together. Dare on guard, as is the nature of the brute."

"Brute indeed !" muttered Hugh to Jim ; and the latter smiled amusedly. He read his cousin like an open book ; and then he turned attention to Mercy, and decided that old Hugh had no need to fume or fret.

"She doesn't care a red cent for the fellow," was his dictum ; "and if she did it wouldn't hurt Hugh's chances ; for Mercy's not for him neither. My private opinion, which nobody will want, is that Mercy's husband has not yet shown up. Also that she will break a few hearts before he does unless he looks mighty sharp about it."

"So little Alya is to spend her holidays at Quentin Easter ? Happy little person !" said Captain Dare.

Mercy's grave direct glance met his with something of rebuke. She did not approve of the easy intimacy of his mention of Alya. Also how did he know ? As though she had put the question he gave the answer.

"We meet sometimes in the early morning—the only hour of the day fit to be out. Why do you not ride early yourself ?"

"It is monotonous ; and I am up late almost every night. Also it has been very, very hot. It does not seem like riding after the country . . ."

"Come to-morrow morning. You will find it worth while."

Mercy put her hand upon Hugh's arm.

"I see Aunt Parminster yonder. I think she is looking for me. Will you take me to her, please ?"

Jim stood looking at Captain Dare, smiling to himself. A very ugly gleam came into the sombre deep-set eyes of the man he watched ; and when he had plunged into the

crowd Jim was joined by a youthful member of the diplomatic service.

"That's Dare, isn't it? Queer customer, eh?"

"I know precious little of him. His family place is near the Quentins'; but he's seldom there. Do you know him?"

"Not much; he's a dark horse. But one hears queer tales. He's been a good bit in Sicily lately: it's said he has property there too, though how come by . . ." A shrug rounded off the sentence.

After a slight pause the youthful diplomat began on a fresh subject.

"We'll all of us be glad when this Coronation business is over. I should guess the King more than any. They say he's looking seedy—a bit worn out. But he'll buck up all right, you'll see."

"Royalty always does come up to the scratch," said Jim; "but, as you say, we'll all be glad when it's over and done with. See the Duke of Norfolk over yonder? I guess he's pretty well sick of the whole show. No eight hours' day for him, what?"

Three days later the bomb burst upon a breathless and at first absolutely incredulous city and country.

No Coronation!

The thing seemed impossible—unthinkable. All these magnificent preparations; all these decorations and functions! The whole metropolis filled from end to end; seats and windows purchased, every detail in the gorgeous pageant arranged for.

No Coronation!

The King lying 'twixt life and death: the voice of supplication and prayer ascending from every great fane, every parish church, from almost every private home throughout the length and breadth of the land.

No Coronation!

And more than this; no more gay assemblages of rank and fashion, no more whirling dances in historic houses, or grand dinners to the potentates and honoured guests from other countries.

174 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

Mercy, after attending one of the many solemn services in the churches of that great city which was to have witnessed this splendid sight, came quietly to her aunt's private room.

"May I go home—to grandmother?"

Lady Parminster looked up from her *escritoire*. She was writing off, with the assistance of her daughters and secretary, the almost superfluous notes which cancelled alike her own invitations and those engagements which she had made. Voices just now were hushed, and the strong summer sunlight seemed dimmed by the magnitude of the cloud which had arisen so unexpectedly in the midst of golden brightness.

"Has she sent for you back, my dear?"

"Not exactly; but she asks what I am going to do. There will be no more London season for me to stay for. I should like, if you do not want me, to go home."

"Well, dear, do. I do not know what we shall be doing yet. But there is nothing to stay for from your point of view; and of course Quentin Easter wants its mistress back."

"I have been very happy here, auntie; and I know you will have me back to present me another year when . . . if . . . but one cannot talk about things yet."

"No, one is just stunned and bewildered. Yes, I understand exactly what you feel. I think that for the moment at any rate you will be happier at home. If there is anything later for you to come up for—well, we shall all be delighted."

So Mercy got her release a full month earlier than she had ever hoped or expected.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HOME SWEET HOME

COLONEL QUENTIN took her back ; and brought the last bulletin from Buckingham Palace with him.

The news was better. The country began to breathe afresh. Perhaps there might even be a Coronation—weeks or months ahead. The nation's prayers had once more prevailed ; and in many a heart the words of the Psalmist were ringing with strange prophetic meanings.

"He shall not die but live ; and Thou wilt set a crown of pure gold upon his head."

Joyce was on the platform at Paddington to see Mercy off. She had not been able to see her to say good-bye, but had told her the time of the train. It was therefore not a great surprise to see the bright red-gold head mingling with the crowd at the station, and Mercy exclaimed joyfully :

"Oh, look, Uncle Alec ! There is Joyce ! I wish we could take her down with us ! But she will soon be coming now. She is such a dear—and I know she will be famous some day !"

"Which accounts for your present enthusiasm, eh, Mercy ! You hope one day to shine by reflected glory !"

Joyce had espied them now, and was eagerly advancing.

"Alys would have come if she could, Mercy ; but Mrs Roby has been just a beast since the Coronation was postponed ! She had her dress, and you had given her the ticket, and she was as pleased as Punch, and cock-a-hoop to a degree ! Really one would think that it was Alys's fault that the show is off ! Poor little woebegone mortal ; but I tell her just to buck up, and August will be here in a jiffy ! I'm counting the days too ; but it's easier for me ; for I love my life, and Alys hates hers."

176 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

Colonel Quentin watched with interest the eager faces of the two girls as they chatted in the carriage before the train started. Joyce had eyes for everything and everybody.

"Oh, do look at that man coming along! All this world made for him and a bit of the next one too! Oh, the condescension of the animal! How I should love to trip him up and bring him a real good cropper over that luggage truck. Mercy, I must draw him! And that old lady with the bird-cage and basket! Isn't she sweet? I know there's a cat in the basket, and she doesn't want anybody to know, in case she has to take a ticket! And there's that dear dog! Oh, he's *rather* sweet—trying to keep all his party together—look at his expression! Oh, and there's a lost baby crying! Mercy, I must get out! Children never cry with me. . . ." In a moment she was out on the platform, even her last farewell was only a frantic wave of the hand; for the lost little boy was clinging to her as to his sheet anchor, and she was turning the tears into smiles.

"That's a nice girl," said Alec Quentin, as the train bore them away, and Mercy nodded emphatic assent as she picked up the paper which had fluttered from Joyce's hand as she sprang from the carriage. It was covered with those little clever portraits of the faces and figures she saw around her, dashed in with a few decisive strokes. Uncle and niece laughed together over it, and the soldier added to his original statement:

"A nice girl and a clever one. I am glad that you will have her for a friend, Mercy. You will do each other good."

"It will be delightful to have her at Quentin Easter in the summer holidays. She is going to stay at the Little Old House; but she will paint my portrait somewhere, with a background that grandmother is to fix upon. And Alys will be there too—and she is such a good reader, and good at knitting and needlework. She is a great help when I am busy. Oh, Uncle Alec, I feel almost naughty. I am so pleased to be getting home! I had thought I should be a whole month longer away!"

"So gay London town has not bewitched you quite?"

Mercy's laugh rang out free and clear.

"Not a bit: and yet I liked to see it all. It is very wonderful—all those people—like the pieces of a gigantic puzzle, every one with a place in the world. I liked to watch it all. I liked to see Uncle and Aunt Parminster receiving their guests, or being received themselves; I liked to help her with her letters, and see what wonderfully full lives people lead, and how many, many things they do, and how many things are going on of which we know so little in our quiet home. It is like climbing up and up some funicular railway, and seeing all along it things and places and life that you never suspected before, just looking up from below. I have liked to see it all. It helps you to understand a great many things which puzzled you before. But I am very glad that I have not to live like a great lady in London. It will make Quentin Easter all the dearer to me now."

"Still a home bird, Mercy? That was always one of your qualities. Well, I agree. I have done a good bit of wandering in my time; and I have come to the conclusion after it all that there is no place like home."

She slipped her hand happily into his, child-fashion, as in the days of yore. She felt it very good to have this soldier uncle beside her, who still called Quentin Easter "home."

"I wish you could come and live with us always, Uncle Alec."

"When I have beaten my sword into a ploughshare, eh, Mercy? Well, the time may come when I shall think about that, unless we have more troubles ahead, which we hope will not be the case. After you have done a good many years of frontier fighting, and been through a war like that in South Africa, the piping times of peace fall a little flat. And there are younger men pushing up. I've had the regiment now for a good spell. It's on the cards I may retire in due course. . . ."

"And come and live at Quentin Easter! How charming!"

"Well, Quentin Easter will always be my magnet. Will you let me one of your farms, Lady Paramount, and see

178 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

what sort of a tenant I shall make? Do you remember that I was always experimenting as a youngster with scientific theories about high-class farming? I believe still that much more might be made of the land yet. Shall I come and experiment upon Quentin property?"

It was a happy journey down, and Mercy could scarcely believe it when the great express pulled into the station. But as she looked forth from the carriage windows she gave a happy cry:

"Dare! Dare!—you darling boy! How did you come here all by yourself?"

The huge hound was instantly at her side. His welcome was not vociferous, like that of the Muggs family. But he lifted his huge muzzle and gazed up into her face with a human intelligence of welcome, and solemnly conducted her to the carriage outside, where Lady Sarah was awaiting her.

"He seemed to know what I drove here for," said the old lady. "Generally he will not leave the carriage when I am in it. But when we reached the station he walked straight in, without any lead from James. He never follows any of the men. I suppose he has travelled by rail before."

How lovely was the midsummer landscape, as they drove through the leafy lanes, with the scent of summer-tide in the air. The soldier gave all the news to his mother as the carriage rolled along; for Mercy sat in an ecstasy of silent rapture.

This home-coming was something different from any other. She had passed her probation; she had been through all those stages of development and educative advancement which was to lead up and fit her for the life she now came to take up. Hitherto as child or girl she had willingly and sweetly submitted herself to the guidance of others. Bred up in the traditions of an ancient house, she had given honour where honour was due, and had seen no hardship in subordinating her own desires and wishes to those in authority.

Now she herself was to exercise rule and authority. She was approaching a wide domain which in law and in

fact was her own. Her power would be exercised over very many human lives. Her influence whether for good or for ill would be widely felt.

Therefore Mercy's face was grave beneath its brightness, and intertwined with a happiness almost too great for expression, was a sense almost of solemnity and of awe. She was coming home a ruler, where until now she had been one of the ruled. And deep down in her heart she heard the old instinctive cry :

" Let me be good ! Let me be good ! "

Miss Marjoribanks had been Lady Sarah's constant companion during the brief period of Mercy's absence ; and she was at Quentin Easter with General Muggs to give them welcome.

Out in the soft twilight of the gardens, whilst Alec sat with his mother and continued his story of London's interrupted pageant, Mercy and her woman friend walked to and fro together, or sat beneath the stars, watching the solemn rise of the moon just past its full, whilst the girl spoke of many things near to her heart which she could speak of more easily to her dear " Miss Marjorie " than to anyone else in the world. For from the first day of their acquaintance Miss Marjorie had always admitted her to a certain equality of friendship, and as Mercy developed and advanced along the path towards womanhood she was increasingly grateful for and appreciative of this privilege, which had never been withdrawn.

And so to-night she spoke some words which had never before passed her lips.

" Miss Marjorie, you would not think that it was a woman's duty to marry, if she did not wish to ? "

" Certainly not, Mercy. Unwilling marriage is a prostitution of that ordinance which God gave for the highest blessing He has in store for us."

" You call marriage the highest blessing ? "

" True marriage—as given by God—yes. But it is one of life's mysteries that it is just the highest and the holiest gifts which, if used for base or unworthy ends, become the most terrible of scourges."

180 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

" You have never married, Miss Marjorie."

" Do you want to know why ? "

" I do not want to be intrusive."

" Then I will tell you. It is a commonplace little story. Only once in my life—and I was very young then—did I ever meet a man who I should have cared to marry. And he did not want in the least to marry me ! He was a good deal older. He came into my life for a short time—and then went out. I did not break my heart or go into a decline. But for a good many years after that no other man interested me in the least. And my work interested me immensely : and there was my dear old mother. Marriage passed me by, and I had no regrets."

" Perhaps some other people had regrets, Miss Marjorie ! "

" Well, my dear, we do not tell tales out of school. I do not think I broke any hearts. I have been a very happy woman ; and I hope I have never made any life unhappy myself. I think not. I have had many very good men friends, and may have more ; but that particular dream which most girls indulge was never realised in my own case. And I can truthfully say that I have never regretted it. Perfect marriages make for the most blessed fulness in life—I freely believe that. But such marriages as we too often see about us—give me rather single blessedness and my happy independent little home."

Mercy sat with Dare's head upon her lap watching the burnished disc of the rising moon.

" You do not think that because Quentin Easter is mine now, I *ought* to marry ? "

Miss Marjoribanks' reply was given with brisk directness :

" Most certainly I do not."

" I am so glad," said Mercy simply. " I wanted to ask you that."

BOOK IV

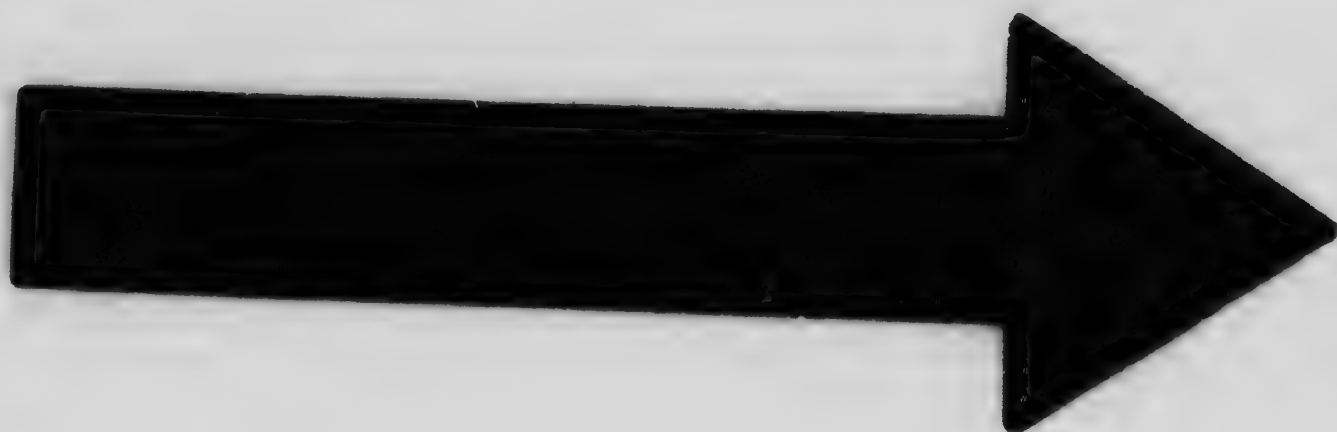
THE LADY OF QUALITY

CHAPTER XXIX

AFTER MANY DAYS

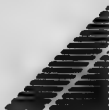
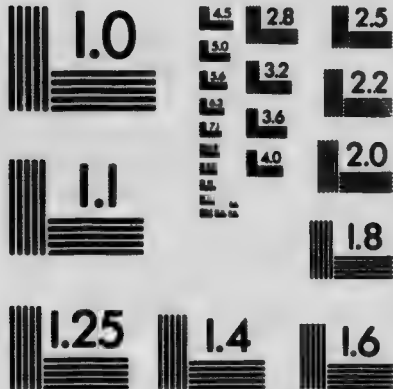
THE brooding stillness of summertime lay over the land. Away in the distance the whir and click of the reaping machine made a pleasant drowsy music. Nearer at hand, but not near enough to disturb the sleeping girl upon the couch, the lawn-mower was at work, and at intervals the ring of hone upon blade told how the men with bill-hook or scythe were cutting and trimming in corners and shrubberies, whilst bees made dreamy music in the lime-blossom, and a riot of summer glory spread a dazle of colour wherever the eye roved.

Mercy came down from the wide terrace, and softly approached the white-faced invalid upon the couch. Her face expressed a tenderness and solicitude which was very beautiful to see. The three years which had passed over Mercy's head since she had made her *début* in London society had wrought but little change there; save that the lines of her face had taken on a nobility and steadfastness of purpose which gave additional character and meaning to the finely cut Quentin features. The glance of the great grey eyes was still meditative, bright and inquiring: the smile still seemed to lie slumbering there, ready to kindle into a charming life. But something of the childlike appeal had insensibly merged into a quiet serenity and composure; as though the woman in Mercy had awakened, and with that awakening confidence the dignity of maidenhood had come.



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



APPLIED IMAGE Inc.

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5888 - Fax

As she moved softly over the sward, followed by the great hound Dare, who was never absent from her side save when such absence was absolutely inevitable, the tail of a brindled dog, who lay beside the couch, began gently to thump a welcome, and Alys opened her eyes and smiled a soft and languid greeting.

Poor little Alys ! Fortune had dealt somewhat harshly with her ; and Mercy had often known moments of deep distress, uncertain what she ought to do for her.

Holidays at Quentin Easter seemed only to make the life in between more unbearable. Yet Lady Sarah remained firmly of the opinion that it would not be true kindness to make Alys entirely dependent upon the interest and support of Mercy.

Also the crabbed old aunt, who gave Alys a home, was failing in health, and began to depend more and more upon her young relative. So Mercy had to content herself with gifts of flowers, fruit and game, baskets of farm produce and sympathetic letters : and Alys had to take morning engagements with unloved tiresome pupils, and write her little stories at home as she was able. But she could never bring herself to the point of loving her work, or of loving the unlovely relative to whom she ministered. She was gentle by nature and training ; but in her heart lurked always a deep sense of dejection, almost of despair. But for Mercy, as she often told her, she would simply give up and die. Mercy knew that this sort of dying was more easily thought about than accomplished. Yet she was deeply sorry for the delicate, burdened, sorrowful girl ; and was constantly turning over in her mind plans for rescuing her from her depressing surroundings and dreary round.

Then at the end of three years something happened. The old aunt took influenza and died. Alys, who had nursed her with an unexpected zeal and devotion, developed the same complaint—and very nearly died. It was at this crisis of affairs that Lady Sarah agreed with Mercy that the time had come when she might act. No other relative appeared to make any claim upon Alys. The old aunt had left her what she herself possessed. It would give the girl an in-

come of perhaps two hundred a year, which would keep her in modest comfort ; and meantime she was to be brought to Quentin Easter to recover health and strength, and perhaps remain on afterwards for a while in the capacity she had so often filled before, of companion to Mercy and reader and amanuensis to the old grandmother.

This had been a great joy to Mercy. It was a trial to her generous spirit to feel that she had so much, whilst others had so little. Nevertheless her sound judgment warned her against the exuberant youthful generosity which often turns out so disastrously for its recipient. And now she felt that her discretion and patience—learned from those older and wiser persons whose judgment she had always respected—had met its ultimate reward.

"Dearest, you have been asleep !"

"Yes ; it is such joy to sleep out here, and to awake and find it no dream. All the time I had the fever, I was dreaming of lovely places like this, which I saw but could never get to. Oh, Mercy, it seems too good to be true ! Lady Sarah has asked me to stay on after I get better, to read to her and help her with her letters and her needlework. Think of it, Mercy—to live here—with you !"

The soft dark eyes were swimming in those tears which had always come all too readily, and which weakness made it hard to hold back. Feeble arms were held out, and Mercy gathered the wasted form into a close and loving embrace.

"Dearest, it is what I have so often thought of before ; but the way did not open. You had your duties elsewhere. You are glad now that you fulfilled them so sweetly and tenderly to the last. Now you are to be taken care of yourself, nursed back to health and strength ; and then you can be useful to others again."

Quite unconsciously, yet with an effect of quaint sweetness, Mercy used towards Alys that tenderness of manner and diction which had characterised the mutual relations of her grandparents during their latter years. When Molly and Sally ran over to Quentin Easter on their father's powerful motor, to spend a day with their cousin, they laughed consumedly at her, whilst vowing her to be the

184 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

sweetest thing that breathed—only so old-fashioned and antique.

Molly was married now ; but was often at her father's house, and always ready for an expedition to see Mercy. She was happy enough in the modern way—leading a gay and very independent life, free from family cares, rushing from one distraction to another, with or without her husband as the case might be—and Mercy hearing her gay stream of talk and taking mental notes of many things, after her manner, was glad that Sally remained yet unwed, since her heart had never been touched, and she made no secret of her preference for "single blessedness."

"Old maids have the best of the good things of life, if they go the right way about it," she said, only a few days back. "You and I are the wise ones, Mercy—particularly you—who can do as you please in your small kingdom."

Mercy had smiled without direct response ; but she had seen the wistful light dawn in the dark eyes of Alys, and was able to appreciate the softly spoken words :

"Oh, but, Sally, it must be so beautiful to have somebody strong to take care of you—somebody who would fight your battles, and stand between you and the cold, hard world !"

In Mercy's heart the generous longing had surged up, herself to stand between Alys and the buffets of fortune in the future ; and so there was an added tenderness in her manner towards her convalescent, who had been definitely told by Lady Sarah of the plan for her near future.

"Is Joyce here ?" asked Mercy, caressing the head of the brindled dog, whose home was more at the Little Old House than at Quentin Easter now, though he was equally welcome at both.

"Joyce brought Miss Marjorie up to look at the picture. They have gone to the long gallery together."

For Joyce was now engaged upon a portrait . Lady Sarah, in the stately setting of one of the finest portions of the fine old house. Mercy's portrait in the exhibition of two years back had brought the girl into sudden repute. Joyce was in requisition as a painter of human and animal

subjects. Her joyous temperament won her friends ; and her genius was making its mark.

She had enough commissions to render her happily independent. In London she had a studio of her own, and lived with one or another of her brothers. But that which she called her true home was the Little Old House close to Quentin Easter, where Miss Marjoribanks had a room always ready for her, a corner of the studio all her own, and a cordial welcome for the happy and talented girl whenever she liked to avail herself of it.

Joyce seemed likely to be more and more with the friend who taught her so much, encouraged and inspired her best efforts, and curbed and pruned with the unerring instinct of the true artist those extravagancies and redundancies from which the work of the youthful genius is rarely free.

This change made for much happiness to Mercy in the stately quiet of Quentin Easter ; and there was another which seemed to fill her cup of happiness to the brim.

Colonel Quentin—perhaps her favourite uncle—had done the thing of which he spoke as possible. He had retired from the service, and was now Mercy's tenant in the quaint old Manor Farm which went by the name of Hallows Easter, and was as the crow flies scarcely a mile away from the old home.

Colonel Quentin was one of those men who must be actively engaged ; and after the campaigning life he had led so long, he felt the monotony of barrack life. As a noted cavalry officer he was seriously disturbed on the question of the decrease in horse-breeding in the country, and having very fair private means, lately augmented by an unexpected windfall bequeathed him by a distant relation, he resolved to organise a fine stud farm, and rear horses from the best blood obtainable. And some of the fine open down and moorland country round and about Quentin Easter offered him the exact kind of pasturage and surroundings which he wanted.

Incidentally he was of the greatest help to Mercy in the management of her large property. The old steward was indefatigable and staunchly faithful ; but he was now well

advanced in years. To displace him would have broken his heart. He had an old man's distrust of the ways of the rising generation, and held in a fine and often well-justified contempt the kind of men turned out by the recent Education Acts. He did not want help from any such, he declared ; and an older man brought in might be a source of friction and trouble.

But to work under a Quentin ; to have " the Colonel " to talk to, to refer to, to discuss moot points with—that was another matter. And Mercy delighted in listening to the talks between her two faithful advisers, who always preferred that she should be present, and deferred to her with a respect and chivalrous regard which it was good to see. Her quick and true feminine instincts aided by their masculine experience acted with the best results, and the property of Quentin Easter throve and flourished apace.

Happy years these had been for Mercy, flying by so fast that she could scarcely believe that so many had passed. Bright and happy was the face she turned upon Miss Marjorie and Joyce as they appeared coming from their visit of inspection, and she moved to meet them with a very glad light in her eyes.

" Miss Marjorie—I have some news for you and General Muggs." She stooped as she spoke to touch the brindled head. " At last I have heard from Colin. You know Mr Earle gave me an address which he thought might find him." (In South Africa the clergyman had come across his expupil once or twice, and had been trying to trace, through friends made out there, what had become of young Dare, of whom his kinsman had appeared to lose all knowledge.) " The answer was so long in coming that I thought I never should get any. But just now the post brought it ! From some place so strange that I don't know where it is ! The letter has been months getting here. But Colin hasn't forgotten me, nor ' Private Muggs ' either. And he says that, if he possibly can, he will be here some time this year. How pleased we shall both be, Muggy dear, to see Colin again ! "

CHAPTER XXX

GOLDEN SUMMER DAYS

THE House of Dare had been shut up for all the three years during which Mercy had reigned at Quentin Easter. Only once during that interval had Captain Dare returned. His visit had been very brief. Mercy had seen him a few times, and had failed to learn from him any news of Colin.

Always he had made upon her the same impression. A man who brought cloud and shadow with him. In his presence the glory of the summer sun seemed to be obscured. Something cold and in measure fearsome stalked in his wake. Mercy, whose nature was fearless, whose temperament was sunny, experienced sensations closely akin to nervous fear when she met the sombre gaze of those dark eyes. The fear did not last ; she was able to drive it away—to hold it at bay. Even as a child she had had this power. Nevertheless it was to her something slightly uncanny, perhaps even a little unclean. She was conscious in this man's presence of a battle of wills. He never saw her without seeking in some slight fashion to dominate her, to compel submission to his power, whilst ostensibly paying homage.

No one else was aware of this recurring and silent struggle. Mercy never spoke of it to any living soul. But she knew that it existed. She had perceptions which told her that one day the battle would rage more strongly. She knew that this man desired something from her which she could never grant. She also knew that as an enemy he would be dangerous. If hurt in his pride and self-esteem he would strike back fiercely—perhaps brutally. How he would hurt her she did not know ; but the conviction of his power to wound remained.

Not that she brooded or gave overmuch thought to the

matter. Captain Dare had his own life to lead far away from the grim walls of Dare. Now and again she heard surmises that he was building up a property in the sunny south, which when sold to advantage would resuscitate the fallen glories of his house. But all this was surmise. No one knew the truth ; and meantime the House of Dare was left empty and desolate, whilst over the stretch of open country between it and the Quentin Easter property, Alec Quentin's colts and rougher stock ran more or less wild, and purchase of the more valuable portions were in negotiation between Mercy and the present owner.

And before the year closed Colin might come again ! That was a thought which pleased Mercy mightily. She wanted to see him herself—the child comrade of those two bright early years—she very greatly desired that he should see again the faithful old dog, who carried his many years so bravely, but who could scarcely be expected to live much longer. Then deep down in her heart, scarcely recognised even by herself, was the thought that perhaps in Colin, little Alys might find the protector whom she craved.

No matchmaker was Mercy ; but she did believe that Alys needed, almost more than any other woman she had known, the care and tender protection of a strong man's love. Then the doctors all agreed that she would be better in a warm climate ; and Colin was not rooted in England. Colin, she believed, had made money—how much she could not guess—and he had no ties to keep him in the old country. He was a Dare. He would have grown up a splendid specimen of manhood. That she did not doubt. Lionel E. had told her how the little dark-eyed slender boy had developed into a soldierly man, handsome, stalwart, of lionlike courage and with the will power of his race to do and dare great things.

Alys had been fascinated by the Dare face of the Dare whom she had seen. Without much doubt the younger and more open and attractive face of Colin would draw her still more.

With innocent artfulness Mercy would talk to Alys and Joyce of the little boy with whom she had played. When

Lionel Earle appeared upon the scene, he was asked questions innumerable about the trooper Colin, who had done so many gallant deeds amid the turmoil and terrors of war.

Often Alec Quentin would join the group round Alys's chair or couch, and the talk would drift away on this tack or that, each man who had seen war (one from the soldier's point of view, one from that of chaplain to sick and wounded—for whom the field of battle had no terrors) capping the story of the other, whilst the girl faces glowed and flushed or paled with emotion.

Joyce's unwearied pencil would often be at work—her ambitions now began to turn towards subject pictures of great and stirring deeds: and once, as she sketched the incident recorded of a trooper riding through the fire zone with a wounded comrade across his saddle, Mercy looked at the picture with a little exclamation of astonishment and delight.

"But, Joyce—that is Colin—grown up! Mr Earle—look! Is not that like what Colin is now?"

The clergyman took the paper and his eyes lighted.

"It is extraordinarily like! Miss Trevlyn, you must be a witch! How did you know?"

"Why, it's not so wonderful after all. I've seen Mr. Earle's photo of little Colin and Muggs. I've seen Captain Dare with what people call the Dare face. One can put wot and two together sometimes."

Alys had the sketch in her hands now. She was feasting her eyes upon it. A little pink flush was in her face.

"It is very like Captain Dare! How very handsome he is! Did he really carry off a man like that! How splendid!"

That summer Mercy received an invitation to Eyton Grange. She had had occasional letters from Miss Rossiter and Mrs Dale during the years which were passed. Once Miss Rossiter had come to Quentin Easter for a Sunday. More than once when Mercy had been in town or with her Parminster relations she had gone over to spend the day with the ladies who had once been her schoolmistresses.

They still had a few girls living with them, girls whose parents were in India, and wanted a home for their daughters who had got beyond the school age. But the character of the house had changed; the scholastic element had greatly disappeared. The sisters were in easier circumstances now, and the house had resumed its old character of a country manor-house of Georgian times.

Mercy was pleased to spend a few days there. The Miss Rossiters were kind, friendly and cheerful. But Mercy thought that Mrs Dale looked very delicate and fragile, and was told that, though she professed herself quite well, her sisters were often very anxious on her account.

"You see, she went out so young to India; I always think that her health was undermined there. . . ."

"Was Mrs Dale in India? I did not know."

"No, we do not speak of her short, sad, married life." Miss Rossiter's gaze wandered a little, and in her tones there was a note of most unusual hesitation. "In a very few years she returned—a widow. It was all extremely sad. We never speak of it to her. It is better to try and forget. But the climate at her immature age tried her greatly. She has never been the same since—never had the health that we enjoy. Then of course these cold Oxfordshire flats do try a great many constitutions. We stand the cold and damp splendidly. We were born and brought up here—as she was too, poor dear—and it never seems to hurt us. But Lilius is different. And yet we cannot get her to go away. She has always shrunk from society, from making friends, from going anywhere alone. And so things just go on. . . ."

It marked a departure in their mutual relations that Miss Rossiter should speak to Mercy of Mrs Dale as "Lilius." Mercy had not known before what her Christian name was. She thought it suited her. She always seemed pale, a fragile, gentle creature, and now she looked as though a breath would blow her away. Mercy's heart always went out towards those in suffering or sorrow. Alys was now on the highroad to health. Could she do anything for Mrs Dale?"

The soft air of the West Country might suit her. But though Mercy was mistress of her house, she never did anything without first consulting Lady Sarah. But a note was despatched that same evening, and as Mercy anticipated what the reply would be, she began gently to pave the way. Mrs Dale was her companion the next morning in the boat which Mercy asked leave to row.

It was easy to talk of Quentin Easter, the home she loved so well. It was easy to bring in the little phrase again and again: "I should love to show you that. . . . You would think that so sweet. . . . If ever you are near us I will show you this. . . ."

And Mrs Dale, with a fair, sad face and eyes which haunted Mercy at night, made suitable response. But Mercy felt the difference in fibre between her and her last protégée. There was no clinging, and more than meeting half-way any suggestion of this kind. If Mrs Dale were to come to Quentin Easter, she would need some persuasion to do so. But Mercy had one arrow in her quiver which she meant to discharge later on, when time and the softness of the hour and the scenery had induced a sense of closer intimacy than ruled at the first. Mercy was telling of Alys and Joyce, and how they had in measure grown into her life, and were so much at Quentin Easter. This led naturally to the subject of Mercy's other friends; and when the moment had come, she drew her bow at a venture.

"And in the autumn I quite hope that Colin Dare will come back to England on a visit."

There was no reply. Mercy dipped her sculls, and watched the water running off them and making tinkling music which blended with the soft swish of her back leathering stroke.

"Colin was the little boy I played with and learned lessons with long, long ago. I have not seen him since I was quite a tiny. But we have never forgotten one another. I wrote to him last Christmas, but I have only got his answer a few weeks. He is coming back, he hopes—perhaps to spend next Christmas here."

"You would like that!"

The voice was very low. Mercy, looking up, saw that the pale face was absolutely colourless now. But she refrained from comment or exclamation. Only the old conviction was immeasurably strengthened. Something of this woman's tragic past was linked up with the name of Dare.

She had had a short and tragic life, lived in India. And Colin had been brought from India as a very little boy—by his kinsman—though not his father—Captain Dare. What was the connection? And what did Mrs Dale know of the past story of the Dares?

Silence fell upon them, which Mercy could not, and Mrs Dale did not, break. They reached the landing stage, and Mercy tied up the boat. Her companion slowly crossed the sunny lawns without seeming to remember the girl, and vanished indoors.

Mercy had her old room in the angle of the house. When she reached it she leaned out of the window, as she had done long ago upon the occasion of her first advent.

History will repeat itself as we all by experience know. As the girl leaned forth, her own spirit in a strange tumult of feeling, she heard from some adjoining room a sound which issued from its open casement—the sound of bitter and stifled weeping.

CHAPTER XXXI

DALE OR DARE?

MERCY obtained her wish. Miss Rossiter was delighted; Mrs Dale smiled her assent coupled with quiet words of thanks. Her sad eyes were looking very tired. Heavy shadows round them added to her look of delicate health.

As she sat opposite to Mercy in the great express which was carrying them both down to the fair West Country where lay the girl's beloved home, the latter studied her face with an attention fraught with a sense of quickened and ardent interest; for she felt like one whose feet stand upon the verge of some hidden mystery; and already it seemed to Mercy as though the veil of concealment were wearing thin, as though revealing light were shining behind in that secret, locked-up chamber.

Lilias Dale! Change but one letter, and she became Lilias Dare! That thought had smitten into Mercy's brain like a flash of lightning during those moments when she had heard the soul of the low heart-broken sobbing a few days back.

Already in the days of her immature girlhood Mercy had been sure that the name of Dare awakened agitating memories in this woman's heart. She had seen her blanch to an ashy whiteness at the sight of Joyce's lifelike portrait of Captain Dare. Her sisters had told of a brief, unhappy marriage; of a home-coming from India, of a past to be buried in oblivion. Of Captain Dare little was known; but his reputation was of having lived wildly, recklessly—like his forebears of that ilk.

Was it possible that he had married—and deserted his wife? Had he made her life so unbearable that she had fled—changed her name—vowed never more to bear his, or see him more?

Such things had been—might be again. Women had passed as widows before this, who had been widowed of all that made the joy or hope of life ; yet had carried with them a terrible secret knowledge of hidden tragedy.

Mercy looked earnestly at her companion, whose dark violet eyes, full of sadness and weariness, were absently fixed upon the flying landscape ; and she found in that pale, still face very much of beauty and of undefinable charm. Although time and sorrow had traced many fine lines there, the skin was soft and flawless still, and the complexion, save for its exceeding pallor, such as many a young girl in the heyday of her beauty might envy. If round the temples the hair had begun slightly to silver, this scarcely showed, for the fine wavy locks were of that very pale gold tint which renders such changes hardly perceptible.

In figure Mrs Dale was tall above the average, and her form was neither slender nor full, but admirably proportioned, with somewhat wide shoulders and a long rather small waist. A graceful woman who moved with grace and distinction. And though she wore none of the conventional trappings of widowhood, she always dressed in black, and with exceeding simplicity. The long straight folds of her well-cut dresses accentuated the fine lines of her figure. By day she wore at throat and wrists spotless white linen, and in the evenings soft white ruffles. Mercy had never seen her in any other garb, though she concluded that for visiting she might wear a low-cut gown in the evenings. Wide-brimmed black hats set off the almost dazzling fairness of her complexion and framed her face in picturesque fashion, taking something off her age to Mercy's thinking. For she had made out from one thing and another that Mrs Dale must be just about twenty years her own senior—forty-five. Yet save for the sorrowful expression indelibly stamped upon her face, she might have been ten years younger.

And she was coming to Quentin Easter : and there was no saying whether or not Captain Dare might appear in the neighbourhood at any moment unannounced and unexpected. He appeared and vanished without warning or

explanation. And the words which little Colin had applied to him long years ago were equally true of him now : " You never knew ! "

But though Mercy's eager brain was hard at work, no question, no indiscreet comment ever passed her lips. One of the qualities her life had taught her was a delicate reticence, finely blended with an equally delicate sympathy. So that unexpected confidences were often bestowed, because the giver felt so absolutely sure that nothing would be asked for beyond that which was proffered.

In the soft shining of the golden evening hour they left the train and began that long drive through leafy lanes and fragrant hedgerows which was always such a joy to Mercy.

Dare, the dog, was at the station to meet her ; but no one else save the servants. The carriage rolled smoothly along : Mercy pointed out such things as were of interest by the way, and presently, as they were crossing a wide highway, she called to the coachman to stop.

" I believe that is Mr Earle coming along. He is a great walker ; but I think he will like a lift this warm evening. We will wait and ask him, if you don't mind. He is our Rector ; but he does a great deal more than just his own duties. Everybody round comes to him for help. You know some men are like that. They seem to draw work to them."

Mercy was right. The clergyman had had an arduous day, and was very glad of the lift. He sat opposite the two ladies, and asked Mercy of her visit, whilst he told her of his own doings and the news, such as it was, of Quentin Easter during the past days. And then he suddenly spoke on another subject.

" Guess whom I have heard from, Mercy ! "

Something in his face—or was it in her own thoughts ?—caused the word to spring to her lips.

" Colin ! "

" Right ! You know I wrote him as well as you. I told him that I was a lonely bachelor at my Rectory, and that if he wanted home quarters near Quentin Easter, he had better make them with me." Then turning to the other lady Mr

196 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

Earle added smilingly : " You see, Mrs Dale, Miss Quentin allows me the use of her pretty Christian name by right of a very old friendship which began in her early childhood, and was cemented firmly during the days when, as curate at Quentin Easter, I was privileged to act as her tutor as well, and that of a small boy, Colin Dare, of whom we are speaking now, though he is a boy no longer."

As he spoke he felt just a little anxious about this lady, she looked so extremely white, though she smiled back at him in a pleasantly detached fashion.

" I know something about Mercy's childhood. I have heard of her playmate. Please go on with your story."

" Well, Colin writes back that he will come to me, and be very glad of headquarters at the Rectory. He hopes to be here some time during the autumn, and certainly will make a point of being home for Christmas. I think he is glad to be free of the House of Dare. I gather that he and his kinsman have had no dealings together since he attained his majority and became his own master."

" Ah, that will be delightful ! " cried Mercy. " The Rectory is so close to us. He will have two homes. But grandmother might not have thought it quite proper for me to have asked him to Quentin Easter. He is not really my brother, though I think I feel as I should to a brother if I had one. I did not want him to be right away at the House of Dare. How nice of you to think of asking him ! "

" I have a great regard for Colin. I was telling you of some of his gallant acts only a few weeks back. . . . "

" Will you tell them to me ? "

Mrs Dale was the speaker. She had her handkerchief in her hand, and pressed it to her lips to stifle a little cough.

" Oh yes, do, Mr Earle. They are such interesting stories ; and I have that sketch of Joyce's, which you said was so much like him. I will show that to Mrs Dale when I get home. At Eyton Grange, if ever I felt homesick, Mrs Dale always let me talk to her about Quentin Easter and my life there. So she will be quite interested to hear about Colin."

Lionel Earle told many graphic stories of the war, and

of those things which men did and dared for their country or their companions. The miles were swallowed up, and the square tower of the church loomed up before them ere ever they were aware, whilst the voice of General Muggs, on watch at a gate a little way down the road, brought Mercy to a consciousness of her surroundings.

Joyce rushed down to hug Mercy and embrace Mrs Dale.

"How ill you are looking, you poor dear thing!" she exclaimed; "but Quentin Easter air will make you a new creature!"

Lionel Earle got down, pointing along the road towards his own gate, now so near at hand.

Miss Marjoribanks came out to welcome the travellers and be embraced by her "nephew," who thereupon turned to Mrs Dale and said:

"My Aunt Marjorie ought by rights to be my cousin Mary, but there are some forces too hard to oppose or set aside. She is one of nature's fore-ordained aunts; and now you will find that Mercy and Joyce, and anybody who comes within the radius of her personality, all find themselves slipping into the 'Aunt Marjorie' which I first began, and which so eminently becomes her!"

Mercy laughed gaily as the carriage drove onwards, carrying her and her visitor homewards. Then the clergyman turned to Joyce and asked with some abruptness:

"Does she always look as fearfully ill as that?"

"Are you speaking of Mrs Dale?"

"Yes; how extremely beautiful she is; but what a haunting sadness there is in her face! I can't get it out of my thoughts. Is she terribly ill? Or has she passed through some unspeakable sorrow?"

"We always heard as girls that she had lost her husband. That seemed to account for her sad expression. Of course, now that I know more of life I do wonder whether there was more than that. For she must have been a widow now for years and years—more than half her life; and her married life was very short, I know. One does wonder whether there was more than just—losing—a husband."

Something in the girl's fashion of speaking made her

198 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

hearer smile ; but later on in the evening, when Arnold Earle came down the road again for a chat in the scented garden of herbs, where Miss Marjorie was often to be found at dusk—Joyce having flown up with General Muggs to the big house—he referred to the same subject again.

Miss Marjorie listening to his words, as he paced up and down in the gloaming, his head bent, his stride often growing long and rapid, as a man under stress of emotion, was presently made aware that something strange had happened. Some impression had been made which was scarcely to be accounted for by the mere fact that a new acquaintance carried in her face a look of some hidden tragedy. Tragedies of all sorts had been brought to the ken of this kinsman of hers in a hundred fashions before—and yet they had not obsessed him like this.

" Arnold, what is it ? What has Mrs Dale done that you cannot get away from the thought of her and the shadow in her past life ? "

Then very simply he spoke his answer :

" I believe I have fallen in love with her. "

Miss Marjorie said nothing. Love at first sight is a thing by no means unknown, though often at the moment unrecognised. There are those who say that it is almost universal—only neither party wakes quickly to the knowledge. At least the phenomenon is known and recognised as one of the possible factors of life. So she had no desire to laugh or to protest. All she said was spoken with gravity and tenderness.

" If that is so, my dear boy, I thank you for your confidence. I need not add that it will be sacred with me. I only advise one thing—careful thought and prayer. You do not know what the secret of that shadowed life may be. Take care lest your own may become shadowed too. "

Three days later, as Arnold Earle sat in his study at this same hour of the gloaming, the window standing open to the scented dusk, he was aware of a footfall along the path, and a figure garbed in black stood before him.

He leaped to his feet. He led the trembling woman into

his room. He would have put her into his deep easy-chair, but she resisted. She threw back the black lace covering from her hair, which shone softly golden in the lamp-light. Her white throat rose pillar-like from a mass of soft white and black chiffon at its base. Her arms to the elbow were bare. The rest of her figure was all blackness, soft and dense.

"I must tell someone. I cannot keep it longer—my secret—the tragedy of my life! You are a clergyman—and you know him—Colin Dare——" Her voice broke in a sob, and she put her hands before her face.

"My name is not Dale. It is Dare. And I am Colin's mother!"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE TRAGEDY OF YOUNG LOVE

ARNOLD EARLE stood silent and rigid. The fall of a pin might have been heard in that silent room.

Lilias stood with her hands before her face ; not weeping, though her figure was shaken by great, long-drawn sobs.

Arnold was the first to recover himself ; and he braced himself for the recital of some story—he knew not what.

Was he to hear that this woman was a discarded wife, and Colin the unowned son of the wild strange man who had always spoken of him as a young cousin and ward ? Was the unhappy wife of Captain Dare standing in his presence now ? Or, if not, what was the tale she had come to unfold ?

At that moment Arnold realised, as he had never done before, how very little anyone in the neighbourhood knew about the Dares, and how little people had troubled as to what the exact relationship was between the man and boy, whose features bore so striking a resemblance, despite difference in age and expression.

He gently possessed himself of one of his visitor's hands, and led her to the seat she had tried to refuse. Now she sank into it trembling, her eyes scanning his grave strong face with an appeal which went to his heart.

' I am a clergyman,' he said quietly, " and you have come to me to tell me your story. You are the mother of Colin Dare. Now, tell me all that you desire beside. Do you wish to tell me also the name of your husband ? "

" Philip Dare was his name. He died in India when Colin was two years old. We had been married just three years. I was twenty-one when I was left a widow."

Arnold was conscious of drawing a breath of relief. He

THE TRAGEDY OF YOUNG LOVE 201

was able now to take a seat himself, and look with quiet resolution into those sorrowful eyes.

"Your husband—died. And you left India without your child; and you have called yourself ever since by a name that is not your right one."

"By one letter," she answered; and he slightly smiled. "You think that a quibble. Perhaps you are right. I was very young, very inexperienced; and I had been frightened past all bearing. I had made a powerful, cruel, relentless enemy; and my husband—was dead."

"Can you tell me the story from the beginning?"

"That is what I am here to do. I cannot bear it any longer alone. No one in the world knows it—unless he, my enemy! Even my sisters think that I lost my child by death. I have not dared to speak all the truth. But now I must. Something forces me to it. I cannot bear myself longer. I must claim my son! And last night as I lay sleepless, bewildered, not knowing what to do, I seemed to hear a voice that said: 'Tell it to the Church.' And then I thought of you—who are Colin's friend—and a servant of the Church. And that is why I am here to-night."

"Tell me all that you wish—that you can. You know—I need not remind you—that what you speak to me in such a manner is as sacred as though spoken under seal of the confessional."

And Lilius—wife of Philip Dare—began her tale.

"When I was young I believe that I was very beautiful."

Arnold felt a little stab, something between triumph and pain, and he bent his head in assent.

"My parents and sisters were proud of me. When my elder sister came out, just before her nineteenth birthday, I was brought out too. That is to say I was allowed to attend a big county ball, given by the military; and there I danced many times with Captain Dare—Philip Dare; and that very evening he asked me to be his wife."

Arnold was conscious of an odd little thrill down his spine.

"I was seventeen then, and he was six and thirty. I thought he was a veritable paladin. You know that the Dares are astonishingly handsome and astonishingly strong

of will. I was lifted off my feet and borne along on the current of his personality. I think it was love—but it was all so long ago. I never doubted it then ; the facile love of romantic childhood ; for really I was only a child. His regiment was suddenly ordered out to India—and he was resolved to take me with him. I was transported by the glamour of love, the prospect of travel, the thought of the freedom and bliss of married life in a strange land—with him. All objections he overruled and bore down. I dare say that my father knew already something about that coming loss of means which so soon began to cripple us. But we did not know. Captain Dare was fairly well off, and had his profession. Settlements were made, but I knew nothing about business. I suppose it was the usual thing, the money settled upon any children there might be. I never asked particulars. I do not know them now. I remember hearing a certain Rolfe Dare spoken off as being trustee ; but I never saw him till we had been some time in India, not until Colin was a year-old baby."

She paused, looking out through the open window into the darkening night ; a great moth fluttered in and flopped round the lamp. The whir of the night-jar made vibration in the warm air. But the clergyman spoke never a word.

" I had found married life different from what I expected. I loved my husband, but I wanted him to remain always my lover. When the round of his arduous military duties engrossed him, and I was left much alone, I was unhappy, though I knew it was foolish. I had been always so petted and caressed. I missed it terribly. It is a risk for a girl to marry a man so much older than herself, unless she has learned more of the world and its ways than I had done. I wanted to be courted and amused, petted and adored. At home I got too few of the sugar-plums of life : so I began to see what I should receive in other quarters. I meant no harm. I was just an inexperienced girl, eager for the glamour and fascination of life in the strange new country. I could not understand why Philip was often vexed, if not angry. My answer always was the same : ' I much prefer being with you ; but if you can't take me,

THE TRAGEDY OF YOUNG LOVE 203

I have to go alone. I am afraid of the long dark evenings in this bungalow, with only these strange black servants. I want to see life, and enjoy it.' He tried to understand. He was patient and good; and he loved me all through, I am sure of that. But I know I disappointed him. Very young girls do. He risked as much as I did: only he might have known better. But then he was a Dare—and must have his way. And, during this first year of our married life, his ambition was stirred by the hope of an appointment which he immensely wished to get. He was in the engineers, but I forget all details, which indeed I never fully understood. Anyway he was much away, and I amused myself—and he got the impression—which he never forgot—that I was . . ."

She did not finish her sentence, and for a moment there was silence. Then she began afresh:

"Little Colin was a great joy to us. It brought us together again. That first year after he came was the happiest year of my life. Then clouds began to gather again. . . . I scarcely know how or why it came about. We were in a different place—in a wilder country; and there was only one other lady in the station, and a great many men—some of them very attractive ones. Of course they liked to come and chat with me and play with the child. Of course I enjoyed their visits. Who would not? Philip was more and more engaged. He had very arduous work, and was doing it well. Often it took him away for days at a time. He had to leave me then; and I was very lonely. Of course the subalterns came in and out. The Colonel's wife understood. I was often with her. But Philip began to be moody and jealous. The Dare temperament, I suppose. And though I always loved him, I grew half afraid of him, never knowing whether he would be angry about things which I could not always help, and sometimes did not try to help. Yet I often think we should have understood each other and been happy together—if Rolfe Dare had not appeared upon the scene.

"He was a great deal younger than Philip; but he was head of his house. That much I learned. And you know

that he has that handsome Dare face and dashing way. It is a little difficult for me to tell you the rest of the story ; but I must do so—or you will never understand.

" Rolfe Dare either really fell in love with me, or pretended to do so. But he was so clever and crafty that he never let fall word or look in presence of my husband which could raise a suspicion of jealousy—and Philip thought everything of him. You know how it sometimes is in families—that clanlike feeling. A Dare could do no wrong. And so things drifted, and I was frightened and miserable, and I believe that Rolfe thought I was pining for him in secret. It was horrible.

" Then came the climax I had foreseen. Philip was obliged to leave on one of his journeys up country to look after bridges and roads. But he was happy about me, leaving me in charge of Rolfe. I dared not tell him how it was ; but I dared not stay in the bungalow with that man. I had just come of age ; and I had been told that a sum of money—about five hundred pounds—had been lodged in the bank of Bombay for me. I made up my mind in a great hurry and in great fear. But to fly seemed better than to stay. I would go to Bombay and get the money, and write to Philip from there explaining things—and perhaps give him a hint. Remember how young and inexperienced I was, and that I was simply horribly afraid of Rolfe Dare.

" So I went. I fell in with other travellers, and managed the journey well. Nothing happened to alarm me, and once in Bombay I found friends, who, though surprised to see me there alone and unannounced, made me welcome and were kind to me.

" Then the bomb burst !

" Philip came back—to find me gone. I am certain that Rolfe told him some scandalous lie—hating me for escaping from the snare he was laying for me. For he could not but have understood. Philip's letter was awful ; and as I read it, it came over me how impossible it would be to make him understand ! I ought to have told him first. He might have been angry and incredulous ; but at least he would have listened. But now . . .

THE TRAGEDY OF YOUNG LOVE 205

"One week later he was dead. He died of cholera. Rolfe was with him, and Rolfe was made sole guardian of our child. I was to have neither part nor lot in his life. I was as one dead to my husband."

"Ah!"

"I do not know whether, if I had taken legal opinion and advice, I could have done anything; but I never thought of such a thing. It was more terrible to me at that moment to think of meeting and waging war with Rolfe Dare than even to part from my child. I knew that only upon one condition would he ever let me have my boy again, and that condition—no! It was impossible! I hated the man; I had come to hate the thought of marriage. The wife seemed but the tool and sport and victim of man's tyranny. I had to let my child go. It tore my bleeding heart afresh—and then and there I resolved that never again would I let myself love.

"For five years I remained hidden in Italy, living upon that money so opportunely mine. Then I came home. You know what had happened at our old home. My eldest sister had set up the school, and the youngest was helping her. I went to them, and have been with them ever since. A part of my story they know—but only a part. They keep the secret of my name, and my wooing and wedding was so hasty that the name of my husband has been long forgotten by our friends. As Lilius Dale I have lived my life for twenty years. And this is the first time that all the tragic tale has passed my lips. I tell it to you because you are the friend of my son, and I want my boy back! I am the mother of Colin Dare!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

LOVE'S MIRACLE

"COLIN's mother!"

Mercy sat spellbound in astonishment.

Opposite to her, in a chair beside the open window, her beautiful hair unbound, and flowing round her like a veil, sat one whom Mercy scarcely seemed to recognise.

For ten days now it had seemed to the girl that a miracle of healing was going on before her eyes.

The pale sad-faced, hollow-eyed woman, whom she had brought with her a fortnight ago to Quentin Easter, was already transformed!

Mercy had had experience before this of the rapid restoration to health of invalids or convalescents brought away from the strife and noise of town, or the strain of overwork, into the quiet atmosphere of rest and peace which was the salient feature of life at Quentin Easter. But she had seen nothing like this.

Lilias Dale had after the first three days exhibited a marked change of aspect. Colour stole into her cheeks; light woke in her eyes; years seemed to fall away like a worn discarded garment, and a splendour of youth and beauty, such as had dimly been seen before, as through a veil, darkly, now energised all her being.

"You are so beautiful!" Mercy had told her that very evening upon speaking her good-night. And then Lilias had suddenly flung her arms round the girl, speaking with a little throb and catch in her voice:

"Come to me to-night, darling . . . when you have seen Lady Sarah comfortable. Come to me then—and let us talk. Mercy, there is something that I must tell to you. It is right that you should know. I owe it you. I want to tell you!"

So Mercy had come—come to find one who seemed almost like a girl, in her soft white wrapper, with her cloud of waving fair hair, pale gold just touched here and there with silver, but so shiningly and wonderfully that there was no dimming of its beauty. It was a woman glorified—so Mercy felt—glorified by some miracle of power which had been working with an immense rapidity through the course of only a few days—yet had accomplished this metamorphosis.

So without bursting into exclamation or question, but with the light of a deep and silent sympathy in those big sweet grey eyes of hers, Mercy had sat down to listen to the wonderful tale. And she heard it in the silence of amazement and bewildered joy, as a child listens to some fairy story, knowing that the preliminary horror and woe is leading by slow and sure degrees to some ultimate glory and triumph.

And now she saw it all. Colin's mother was before her. That mother of whom the child had never spoken, taking it for granted that he had been bereft of both parents.

"Oh, Mrs D—— Oh, I don't know what to call you now. . . ."

"Call me Lilius, Mercy. Never mind the gap in our years; for I am young to-night—young with happiness! Mercy, I must tell you something more. Your dear little face draws my secret from me. And I am so happy—so happy—I must have someone to share it with me! You are always taking part of the burden of the sorrows of others upon you. Now help me to bear my joy!"

Mercy knelt down before this fair creature, who seemed to be palpitating with an unspeakable and glorious sense of inner happiness and joy.

"Dear Lilius, I am so glad that you are happy. Is it because you have a son again—because Colin will be coming back some day before long—to find—his mother?"

"It is that—but it is more than that." Lilius drooped her head, till it almost rested upon that of Mercy, and a tremor ran through her frame. Her voice was only a whisper now: "When my boy—grown to manhood now—comes back and finds his mother, he will find something beside that. He will find he has a father too."

208 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

For a moment Mercy did not understand. Small wonder that her mind was just a little confused. The image of Captain Dare leaped to her vision, and she lifted troubled eyes to the glowing down-bent face.

"A father?—Colin? . . . Not, not——"

Instantly Lilius understood and her figure drew itself together as with the recoil from some hateful thought.

"Mercy, not that—not that! You could not think I meant such an unspeakable thing. Though when a Dare woos—oh, how shall I say it?—he woos like a hero, a prince, a victor! Mercy, have you not seen . . . or understood. . . . It seems to me as though all the world must know. . . ."

"Ah! I understand. You mean—Mr Earle!"

A low almost sobbing laugh broke from the lips of Lilius.

"Mercy, what is love? How does it come? And what is its source? You think that Arnold and I only met each other a few days ago. In one sense of the word that is true. But in another . . . Mercy, it is to us as though all the years before were as nothing—a misty night, a dream that is past, a brief dim episode which is scarcely remembered. It is these few last days which count! Oh, I have no words in which to express it. But it is the same with us both. It is as if I had been waiting in the shadows, in the cold—for the sun to rise—and now it has risen!"

"It must be beautiful to love like that," said Mercy simply. "I am glad you have told me. It helps to make me understand. For I want to know what love means. So many people talk of it—lightly, poetically, whimsically! And when I listen I have a curious feeling that this is only playing at love—not love as it can be—as it ought to be . . ."

"Mercy, you are right—you are right! Never listen to that light and easy and facile love-making! That was my mistake; the tragedy of my life! Philip wooed me fiercely, it is true; but I only admired and liked him. I was flattered and carried away. I was attracted by the thought of life with him. I was not unhappy; if nothing had come between us, I should have called my marriage a happy one enough.

But now I feel the difference! Mercy darling, you will in your position be courted by a great many men. No doubt already you have received homage and adulation to spare. Oh, be very careful, be very cautious. You will know when the real hour strikes! If you do not know—if you are the least uncertain—then let it go! For when the true moment comes, you will know it! Wait for that! Don't be deceived!"

Mercy kissed the eager trembling lips very tenderly.

"I am glad you have said that. Thank you, Lilius. I feel now that you are right. I think I always knew it; but there come times when one begins to think—to wonder—to ask questions. But to *know*—that must be the splendid thing! Lilius dear, Mr Earle has always been my friend, ever since I was a little girl running away and half lost in the woods. And you will live at Quentin Easter now—at our dear old Rectory! How strange it will be to have a lady there—and how nice! Old Dr Ringer was a widower for years and years before he died. Are you going to be married soon?"

There was the bloom of roses in the happy woman's face. She might have been Mercy's elder sister—and not so very much older either—at this moment.

"Arnold says, why should we wait? Mercy darling, would people here be very shocked? He wants a quiet wedding almost at once. I have written home about it. I know they will be pleased. He wants it next month—and September for our wandering in Italy—or wherever we go. And then to settle here for the autumn and winter—ready for Colin, when he comes—home."

"Ah, it will really be home for him then! How nice! But will you write and tell him first?"

"Arnold says better not. For one thing he is not sure that our letters will find him now. Colin spoke of leaving Africa and coming home by the Californian route. We know so little about him; and it is such a long, strange story to tell on paper! I want to feel my boy's arms round me first! I want to sit with my arm about his neck and tell him everything—everything! I will take all the blame

210 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

that I deserve. Perhaps it was cruel of me to let his childhood be motherless. But I was so afraid! I knew Rolfe Dare! I felt that to win my submission to his will he would torture the child, over whom he had complete control. I knew I could not bear that! I should have submitted—and forsworn myself. I hated him, feared him, loathed him! I dared not claim my boy! I prayed to God that he might not ill-use the child. I saw no motive why he should—if I were not there looking on. I held that as the kindest thing I could do to my little one. But, oh! my empty, hungry heart!”

Mercy pressed the hands she held.

“And then—years and years after—from the lips of Mercy Quentin—I heard the name of Dare—I heard of my little boy! Mercy, do you remember how I used to ask you of your childhood, that I might hear you speak of Colin. But you had lost sight of him. You could not have helped me, had I even wished to bring him into my life. And it would have been so difficult. My sisters thought my child was dead. And Rolfe Dare was still his guardian. But now—now, he is his own master—and he is coming to be Arnold’s guest; and I shall be Arnold’s wife. . . .”

“And when you are Lillas Earle, you need have no fear of Captain Dare. He cannot hurt you then!”

“That is what Arnold says. That is why he urges it on. He says that nobody ever knows when Captain Dare may turn up at his house. He wants us to be married before Colin can possibly be here. Mercy, is there any reason why we should not?”

Mercy smiled at the question; but it did not entirely surprise her. As mistress of Quentin Easter, and with Lady Sarah’s weight and influence and counsel behind her, many persons brought questions to her to answer that were not immediately within the scope of her duties or experiences.

And Mercy debated these questions gravely, interesting herself in the concerns of her neighbours, and often vouchsafing them illuminating hints which seemed beyond the range of her years in their soundness and tactful insight.

So to this hesitating question from Lilius she made instant response :

" I think that if you are both so perfectly sure of yourselves and each other, the sooner you can arrange to marry the better. The parish will benefit by having a clergyman's wife there. We at Quentin Easter will delight to have you so near. And if Captain Dare should suddenly come to his house and see you, it will be far better that you should be Mrs Earle than ' Mrs Dale.' "

Lilius threw her arms round Mercy's neck, and the girl could feel the tumultuous beating of that stirred heart.

" I owe it all to you, Mercy—all, all to you ! If you had not brought me here—if I had not seen Arnold, taken my story first to him, learned all the strength and wisdom and tenderness of that big heart—this thing could never have happened. I owe all that to you. And he said that you must hear the whole story from beginning to end. It was your due. How much we tell to the world can be settled afterwards. There may not be need to say too much—only a few of our best friends need know all. But you must be one of them ; for you are our very best friend. Oh, Mercy, how I love you—how I love you ! Colin's little comforter and friend in the days of his shadowed childhood ; and then his mother's friend and comforter—bringing all this great thing to pass ! "

" It is not me really," said Mercy reflectively ; " but it is all very wonderful and beautiful."

CHAPTER XXXIV

IN THE AIR !

MERCY and Joyce were both at the wedding, which took place quietly from Eyton Grange at the wane of August.

As Arnold Earle contended, there was nothing to wait for. Lady Sarah approved the marriage, and only observed with her shrewd old smile that if the wooing were somewhat shorter than in her days, it was all in keeping with the pace at which matters of all sorts moved now.

She had heard the story, and was moved by sympathy for the shadowed life of the woman, widowed and placed in a position of singular difficulty at an age when a modern girl has only just left the schoolroom.

Also she saw very clearly that a marriage consummated before Captain Dare could return to throw any cloud over the life of Lilius afresh, would be a great advantage. What might be the action of this strange man if he were to meet so many years later the woman whose early life he had helped to wreck, it was impossible to forecast. But it seemed in every way advisable, since a meeting between the two was now probable—almost inevitable—that she should have as soon as possible the protection of her husband's name and home. As Mrs Earle of Quentin Easter Rectory, all that was in the least invidious in her former position would be done away with, and no sneer or fleer could be cast that would not rather recoil upon the head of him who made it.

It was a simple and very quiet wedding ; but the happiness of the wedded pair was contagious, and the sun shone upon a bride who, in spite of her quiet garb, with little of the conventional bridal whiteness about it, looked singularly young and happy ; and who spoke her vows with un-

faltering lips, and with an accent of earnestness that it was good to hear.

Joyce made many sketches of her, characteristic and charming, and promised Mr Earle a picture for his study of his bride as she looked upon her marriage day.

She with Mercy spent another night at the Grange, visiting their old haunts, and renewing acquaintance with their former schoolmistresses, who seemed no longer formidable now; and then they took their homeward way, glad to be going back, and very full of the work to be done upon the Rectory in the absence of the wedded pair.

Mercy had a good many delightful ideas that she meant to carry out, and Joyce was eager to aid and abet, and was full of suggestions of originality and value.

They spent a few hours in London, making selection of certain things which were to be Mercy's wedding gift to Lilius; and then caught the afternoon express down to the west, where they enjoyed the seclusion of a carriage to themselves.

It was then that Joyce, leaning back and fanning herself with the wide brim of her hat, propounded a laughing question to her companion.

"Mercy, is it in the air, do you think?"

"What?" asked Mercy, waking from a reverie.

"Marriages, my child, marriages! Holy Matrimony stalking rampant, seeking whom it may devour. . . ."

"Joyce!—that is like one of your naughty sketches!"

"Good thought! I'll draw the spectre!—stalking along on the warpath! But really, Mercy, do you think I am blind? What do Jack and Hugh keep coming down to Quentin Easter for? They have dozens of what would be called livelier houses open to them. Do you think it is devotion to Lady Sarah that brings them?"

Mercy's delightful smile kindled in her eyes, and slowly spread to her parted lips.

"I know what you mean. I am not going to talk about it even to you. But it is no use, Joyce. I could not. And I have told them so."

"That also is obvious. They take their dismissals very

214 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

well—and come again as soon as they dare! Oh, I've been three years watching it—on and off. . . .”

“You see too much, Joyce!”

“I do; but it's not my fault. I can't help it. Besides it's my chief stock-in-trade to use my eyes. And they are such nice boys too. . . .”

“The dearest boys in the world. I tell them so.”

“Which is perhaps the unkindest cut of all! Well, I suppose you are made like that. You always were a little Q.C. ever since I've known you. But . . .”

Mercy looked Joyce full in the eyes.

“If you can keep a secret, I'll tell you one.”

“I'll be mute as an oyster!”

“It's about Alys. Have you ever noticed anything—when Hugh comes down?”

Joyce uttered a little boyish whistle.

“He's very nice to everybody. I notice that; and of course through this summer Alys has been so delicate. Everybody waits on her more or less. You don't mean . . .”

“I mean nothing very particular. Only that Hugh is interested in her, and I try—just a little—to throw them together. If he could get that other notion out of his head—and I believe it is more a sort of survival of an old boyish attachment than anything else—Hughie and I were always the best of friends and playmates—then there would be room for other thoughts and plans. . . .”

“But what would his parents say? He's the coming Sir Hugh Leigh of the next generation, and poor little Alys is . . .”

“Gently born, from a good family tree. Without fortune to speak of; but still, if Hugh were to love her, I am sure it could be arranged.”

“Doubtless you would play fairy godmother. . . .”

“No; but I would play ordinary earthly godmother, and send her out properly equipped. She needs looking after. She craves for love. And she is one of the girls who ought to be married. You know what I mean. They will blossom out and be quite different in happy homes of their own.

And Hugh would be such a good husband and father. I know him through and through; and I am sure of it."

"Yes, I think he's too good for her—that's a fact. What you say of Alys is perfectly true; but I'm a little hard-hearted, I suppose. I rather want to shake her sometimes! Poor little soul, though, she has had a rough time of it often. But I feel that she is getting all that made up to her now. And if she bags your cousin for a husband—well—some people have luck, that's all!"

"I know what you mean about Alys," said Mercy, whose grey far-apart eyes were not too dreamy to watch life with much of shrewd observation. "But she is very lovable with all her little weaknesses and faults; and she would make an adoring wife to a kind husband. I think she would soon win back her sweet high spirit, which she used to have at school, after her first grief for her father's death had passed. I remember how very delightful she could be then. And often it begins to come back now that she is growing stronger. I have seen it many times—and so has Hugh."

"Dear me! It is as I said. There is the matrimonial microbe in the very air. Mercy, since you have confided in me, I will do the same by you. Once upon a time I thought that marriage after thirty was a hopelessly prosaic affair. But I am changing my opinion! Our yesterday's bride and bridegroom were not far from the jubilee stage of existence—yet how young and handsome they both looked! And which pair do you suppose are going to be the next?"

"My dear Joyce, what do you mean?"

"My dear Mercy, tell me this, does or does not the Little Old House lie in the direct road between Hallows Easter and Quentin Easter—answer that first!"

"Well, not in the direct route; but it's not far out of the way."

"Then can you explain to me why Colonel Quentin always walks in at Aunt Marjorie's gate 'on his way' to or from the two Easters? I assure you it's becoming a confirmed habit—like carters at the public-houses. Their horses after a bit can't be got to pass the doors, and his legs are rapidly becoming unable to pass our gate. He generally

216 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

makes some excuse—a flower, a paper, a question, an answer. But the moral is the same—he was ‘just passing’! Aunt Marjorie begins to give me a sly look when he says it. One of these days I shall openly explode—you can’t help it when Aunt Marjorie looks at you like that!”

“Well, Joyce, why in the world should not Uncle Alec run in to see Aunt Marjorie as often as he pleases?”

“Aunt Marjorie—Aunt Marjorie—Aunt Marjorie! Oh, my prophetic soul—my aunt!”

Then Mercy burst out laughing.

“Joyce, you goose! You don’t mean to tell me that you think Uncle Alec is courting Aunt Marjorie! Why, my dear, she must be years and years older . . .”

“Poof! Aunt Marjorie is one of the kind that never grows old! Besides, look at our bride and groom of yesterday!”

“Oh, that’s quite different. It was only two years, and Mr Earle has done so much knocking about and campaigning that he seems quite as old as Liliass. But Aunt Marjorie!”

“Well, my sweet Mercy, keep your little winkers shut if you like! As I say, it’s my business to keep mine open—and I see a lot of things other people don’t appear to notice. Colonel Quentin is a dear—simply fascinating! I wish I had a few uncles of his sort. Mine are stuffies who go to the city and talk stocks and shares—I rather think they eat them too! As for Colonel Quentin, you never get to an end of his stories; and he knows such a lot about other things too; and his mares and foals are simply enchanting. He says I may do some rough riding in the spring, when some of the colts will be getting broken and handled! He is a dear! And Aunt Marjorie knows this as well as anybody. You may bet your bottom dollar on that! And he knows what she’s like—good and true all through. So what do a few paltry years matter? You just come and see, Miss Incredulity! I tell you it’s in the air!”

After that Mercy sat quite quiet for a little while, gazing out of the window at the flying landscape, which was now bearing the impress of the dear home country. A new

thought had suddenly struck her ; and it kindled deep in her eyes a gleam of humorous appreciation, amusement and tentative delight. From time to time she stole a glance at her companion, at the bright eager face and crown of splendid red-gold hair, and in her heart she was saying over and over again :

" I wonder . . . Oh, I wonder . . . "

Through the soft twilight the train sped to its destination and there on the platform to meet them was Colonel Quentin and the great dog Dare.

A lively welcome was followed by a pleasant drive, the girls telling of the wedding and all their doings since.

Colonel Quentin listened, looking smilingly from one bright face to the other, and when they concluded their budget of news, he brought forward one item of vast interest to both.

" Well, the lady has just made her plunge in time. On the day that the marriage was celebrated Captain Dare turned up at his grim old place. He was at Quentin Easter to-day."

CHAPTER XXXV

DANGER ZONE !

ALYS met Mercy at the doors of Quentin Easter—an Alys over whom, as she was quick to feel, some subtle change had passed. There was little time for more than hasty greetings at the outset. Mercy had to run to her room to dress for dinner, and only took her seat opposite Lady Sarah at the right moment by exercise of great rapidity of manipulation.

At table she was called upon to give her account of the wedding, and her subsequent doings at Eyton Grange and in London. Lady Sarah had taught her granddaughter from quite early days to relate any experiences through which she might have passed with accuracy and graphic portraiture ; and as time passed by both the grandparents reaped their reward whenever the child, or girl, had been away from them, through listening to her interesting tale of those things which she had seen, heard and done.

As Mercy talked, she was aware of something new in Alys, something vivid and arresting, some added brilliance of colour and sparkle of glance, which instantly redeemed her pensive beauty from any suggestion of languor or lack of animation, and in some quite distinct yet quite undefinable way dowered her with a new and most arresting personality, with which Mercy did not feel altogether at home during this first hour of her return.

Alys, though listening to the conversation, and adding her quota of comment and question, seemed often far away. It was as though she were floating out upon a halcyon sea of wonder. There was shining in her eyes, a flitting smile upon her lips, and often when her light silvery laugh rang out, Mercy was sure that its predisposing cause was

nothing which was being spoken aloud, but came from some fount of inner happiness.

It was when the servants had handed fruit and left the room that Lady Sarah spoke to Mercy of the happenings at Quentin Easter, which dimly and uneasily she had linked up in her thoughts with this indefinable change that she marked in Alys.

"Captain Dare has been here. Perhaps your uncle told you."

"Yes," answered Mercy, "he did."

There was a little pause, and then the lady went on :

"Nothing was said to him here with regard to—to—the identity of Mrs Arnold Earle. We simply told him that you were in Oxfordshire, at a wedding, and were coming back to-day."

"He wanted to see you, Mercy," said Alys, a vivid colour giving strange brilliance to her delicate features and long-lashed eyes. "He was quite disappointed that you were not here. I know he will come very soon again. Mercy, he is more splendid-looking than ever. Don't you think him one of the handsomest men you have ever seen, Lady Sarah ?"

"The Dares have never lacked for good looks, my dear," replied the old lady quietly. "But there is sound wisdom in the old-time proverb : 'handsome is that handsome does.'"

"And I should think his life had been splendid ! Even the little things he has said to me—the stories he has told—oh, you seem to feel his courage and splendour pulsing through it all ! You need not laugh at me, Mercy ; you know I always thought Captain Dare a real hero of romance !"

Mercy was far from laughing ; the smile upon her lips scarcely disguised something uneasy and anxious in her glance. Alys, under pretext that Lady Sarah wanted to talk privately with the returned traveller, slipped away with a smiling excuse. Next moment Mercy heard her voice singing snatches of a tender little French love song out in the moonlit garden, where the late summer night was hot and breathless.

220 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

Alone with her grandmother Mercy let the gravity of her face be seen ; it indicated trouble of heart.

" Grandmother—I shall have to tell her—all. At least, I am afraid I shall. She must be warned."

For so far the whole truth of Lilius Dare's early life was known to only five persons : Lady Sarah and Mercy, Colonel Quentin and Miss Marjoribanks ; and the clergyman who was now her husband.

To Joyce and to Alys a part had been told—but not the whole. That Lilius had married Philip Dare, who died in India three years later was known to all. That there was some painful story in which the child Colin and his kinsman Rolfe Dare were mixed up, which had culminated in the mother leaving her child and returning to England eventually alone, they also had heard. But the details had been kept back. It had not seemed needful for all the world to know everything. Mercy felt that it was scarcely a generous thing to poison the reputation, in his own neighbourhood, of a man who might conceivably have repented his folly and cruelty and treachery in the past. Lady Sarah had lived long enough to have learned the sound lesson that the least said the soonest mended. Also there was Colin to consider. When he came back he would have some say in the matter. But presumably he would prefer to let sleeping dogs lie. His mother was now Mrs Earle. She was married to a good man who loved her and would be able to protect her. Let the dead past bury its dead. Such had been the opinion of all those persons who had sat in conclave over this strange story.

But now a new peril was threatening—unless Mercy was much mistaken. And this peril must if possible be averted.

" Grandmother, she must not be suffered to fall in love with him ! "

" My dear, is there danger of that ? "

" I think so. She is so romantic and impressionable. She must not walk into that danger zone with unopened eyes."

Lady Sarah looked straight before her. In her eyes shone those reserves of wisdom which are the heritage of experi-

ence alone ; which no human soul ever learns at second hand.

" I think, my love, that it may be right to warn her. But it will make no difference."

" Grandmother ! "

" It will make no difference," Lady Sarah repeated very quietly and gently. " It is just a question of temperament. Alys will listen to the warning ; but she will only believe as much of it as she chooses. That is the characteristic of her temperament. You will see."

" But I could not leave her unwarned ? "

" No, love ; that is one of the qualities of your temperament. You must : : to guard and protect those who are weak, or in peril, in want or in trouble. And sometimes you will succeed, whilst sometimes you will fail. But you have to be true to yourself—and leave the results."

Out in the garden Mercy found Alys—dreaming beside a fountain that threw up its waters with a softly tinkling sound. And stealing up behind her she slipped an arm about her neck.

" Little Alys—what has happened ? "

A laugh as of wonderful happiness seemed to gush forth. The light frayed quivered, and words came hot and fast :

" Oh, it is all so beautiful, Mercy. He has come for you. I know that quite, quite well. And you deserve to have him. You are so dear, and he is so splendid. But you were not here—and I was. And you know what he has always been to me—a sort of champion, hero, like a knight of King Arthur's table ! We walked together round this very fountain, and we sat on its edge and talked—of you ! It was all so beautiful ! And he said I had grown pretty ! He said you were a witch-doctor ! We talked mostly of you, Mercy—that was what he came for. And don't think that I am in the very least bit jealous of you and all it means to you. Only let me be your friend always—that I may see him sometimes ! "

The girl was quivering and shivering in an ecstasy of blissful excitement which was something quite new to Mercy. Yes, she began already to feel something of the

222 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

truth of Lady Sarah's words. The warning of Alys might be a task beyond the power even of her love. The opening of eyes which refuse to see is a task impossible of accomplishment.

"Alys, you talk as though I were going to marry Captain Dare. That is a thing which could never happen."

"Ah, you may say so now; but you don't know—you can't tell. You have never had him make love to you yet!"

"And you think . . ."

"You could not help it, Mercy. You would have to love him then. It is not possible it should be otherwise. . . ."

"Because he has made love to so many women before, that he is past master of the art? Is that what you mean, Alys?"

The girl sprang up and faced round upon her.

"It is not like you, Mercy, to say cruel and wicked things—to stab in the dark! What do you mean?"

"I will tell you what I mean, Alys. Give me your hand. Let us sit here together, where you sat with him. . . ."

Mercy was secretly wondering what it was he had said to this child. Words can be made to bear so many, many interpretations. The flicker of an eager glance, the touch of a strong hand, the inflection of a deep vibrant voice. . . .

"I will put it in very plain and simple words, Alys dear. Captain Dare is not a good man. It was he who darkened the life of Liliās—Earle. He tried to get her away from her husband."

"*She* calls it that, I suppose!"

"It was because she was so frightened at what he might say or do that she ran away in her husband's absence. It was foolish, but she was very young, and rather afraid of her husband. Captain Dare took cruel advantage of this. He poisoned the husband's mind with false stories. Death took Philip Dare before any explanation from Liliās could reach him. She lost her husband, and Captain Dare had the boy. She dared not claim him—or pay the price. He made shipwreck of that poor girl's life. . . ."

"I don't believe it. That is her story. Before you con-

demn him you should hear his. He will have something very different to say ! ”

Mercy met this outbreak in silence. It was a tense and rather pregnant pause. It seemed to her as though the danger zone were pressing nearer and more near.

“ And besides—even it if were true—it is long, long ago. Why, it must be a quarter of a century ago, Mercy ! Fancy dragging up that old tale ! How can you be so unjust ? ”

“ Do leopards change their spots, Alys ? ”

“ I am ashamed of you ! You who are good, and believe in repentance and all that sort of thing ! Why, all young men are wild—I mean men like the Dares—men who are worth anything afterwards ! And that fool of a woman !—that weeping Mrs Dale ! I always hated her. I always knew she was a cat ! ”

Alys had sprung a little away. Mercy did not know her in this mood. She seemed transformed, energised, obsessed by some great overmastering emotion. Mercy only spoke one word :

“ Alys ! ”

It brought the girl to her knees, sobbing, palpitating with all the pent-up excitements of her conflicting moods.

“ Oh, Mercy, forgive me : you are an angel—and I know why you say all this to me. You want to help me. But you don’t understand. It is not me he wants—nor ever will ! It is you, you, you ! He will never have a look or a thought to spare for me ! It is you whom he loves : it is you he means to have. Oh, Mercy, it will be like that Erlkönig’s ride. It’s no good saying you won’t go with him—you will have to ! ”

Then Alys fled to the house, her hands before her face, and Mercy sat silently alone, with the sounds of the summer night about her.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A BATTLE OF WILLS

"MERCY, do you think that I am going to take that for my answer?"

Steadfast grey eyes, fringed with dark lashes, and set somewhat wide apart beneath the square white brow, looked fearlessly into the dark face of the man standing in his towering height before them, and there was no shrinking in their clear, direct, appraising gaze.

Mercy sat in one of her favourite woodland haunts. Beside her, upright on his haunches, was the huge hound, her satellite, whose deep-sunk eyes, with the red light shining in them, were as watchful and alert as those of some duellist who knows that the contest is *à outrance*. A book lay on her lap, but it was closed. Opposite to her, but sufficiently near, his back against the smooth trunk of a giant beech-tree, stood Captain Dare. He has found her here, perhaps he had watched and followed her out. And having found her he had burst out with protestations at once tender and violent, appealing and commanding, a regular "Dare wooing"—ardent, fierce, yet charged with an element of sincerity which gave it edge and effect. It was like some royal beast of the forest seeking his mate—claiming his mate—wooing in that fashion which takes no denial.

Quite unprepared, for seldom indeed had her solitude been invaded here in this lonely spot, Mercy had instantly realised the nature of the errand upon which he came. Startled though she was, and displeased at being thus tracked and caught, she braced herself with the courage of her race for the battle which she knew impended.

Very still and quiet she remained as he let loose the torrent of his eloquence. Her hand rested upon the head of the

great dog. His presence gave her support. She felt that the great brute quivered in sympathy to her mood. He, too, resented the coming of this intruder. Deep down somewhere in the heart of the dog—Mercy knew it well—lay an immense hatred of the man whom he had once known in the capacity of his master.

There was something strange in this which had perplexed Mercy before, since dogs generally attach themselves with great fidelity even to a bad master, and ill-treatment seldom serves to break the bond, though it may cause terror and shrinking to mingle with that bond of canine devotion which is so difficult to comprehend, so hard to sever.

But Dare, the dog, hated the man whom once he had obeyed.

Mercy had not tried to stem the torrent. She knew it would be useless to do so. The man had come to say his say—and would not be denied. He trusted in his eloquence to move, in his fire to kindle, in the force of his personality to lift and carry away. So Mercy must needs listen to this wild and stormy wooing; but it left her unmoved. She felt as though this was a scene from some drama, so often rehearsed before—with another woman as its objective—that the speaker was letter-perfect; the actor well versed in his acts and declamations.

Her mind rose before her eyes of what this man must have been in his hot youth—when he made passionate love to Lilian—the wife of a kinsman who trusted him—and she shivered. How many others had there been in between?

And so the quiet, serious eyes, in which shone no gleam of awakening responsive joy, no palpitating wonder, to be quickened into lovely life, no smouldering spark which would be fanned to a flame, looked gravely, appraisingly, almost sternly forth from beneath those delicate black arched brows which gave such character to Mercy's face. And when at last he paused, impatient that he seemed winning no response, her words came quietly forth, with a finality which struck almost like a blow.

"Captain Dare, I can never be your wife."

"Mercy, do you think I am going to take that for my answer?"

226 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"It is the only answer I have for you, Captain Dare." Then she added with that touch of dignity which so well became the mistress of Quentin Easter: "And I think that you forget sometimes that I am no longer a little girl."

"I do not forget that; but I can never forget the day when first I saw that little girl. Child as you were, you defied me! Do you remember? I have never forgotten! You put yourself between me and my will—and you conquered! Do you think I ever could forget? Deep down in my heart I registered my vow. 'If that child grows up according to the promise of her infancy, I will wait and wait and wait—perhaps till my hair is grey; but she shall be my wife! Mercy, do you believe me?'"

Her gaze was unflinching and steady, but now came just a flicker—was it of mockery?—which stirred the man's pulses almost to madness.

"I think you believe this moment what you say; but I do not believe that any such thought was in your mind on the day when I paid my first visit to the House of Dare."

"Then you are wrong! That thought was full-fledged in my heart a dozen times that day! More than that—it never really left me. At first I played with it, toyed with it, sought to thrust it away and forget it. But I found it would not be dismissed. Then I tried my roving life again—and in the stress and tumult of the battlefield I thought myself cured. But instantly upon my return to my grim old house—I knew that my bonds were forged afresh.

"Do you remember that summer's day when you all came to the House of Dare? You were the queen of the day! You had been set in the place of heiress of Quentin Easter. I had brought tribute to your feet with others...."

Mercy's hand caressed Dare's great head.

"I shall always be grateful to you for this gift."

"You gave him my name. I liked to feel that a Dare was always beside you. But suddenly from the little girl I had known and dreamed of, you had become a wealthy heiress! And the Dares are proud! They like to give dowries rather than receive them. But I saw my way. I had been laying the foundations. A few years more, and I might

hope to approach upon more equal terms. So I disappeared once again. Now I have come back. Mercy, listen to me. Away in the sunny south, where the blight of winter scarcely touches or fades the glories of land and sea—there I have a nest prepared, worthy of the bird whom I will carry thither. Overlooking sunny azure seas—on the slope of a mountain-side, smothered in a riot of colour such as dazzles the eye that gazes, caressed by a glorious sunshine, wrapped in intoxicating fragrance—there stands an old palace, long deserted by its erstwhile owners, inviting the entrance of others who will love it and bring life back once more to its wide echoing halls, its stately marble terraces, its loggias, its exquisite tangled gardens, in which still there seem to echo the voices of lovers and the music of the serenade.

"All this is mine and yours, Mercy; for it has been won—and planned and made ready—for you!

"Love, listen . . . there is our home . . . yours and mine . . . by that amethyst and silver sea . . . amongst those groves of orange and citron, with that tangle of wild free fragrance around us!

"Come with me, Mercy—for all is ready! It only waits for the bride of my choice!

"Mercy, you have never yet been loved! Oh, I have seen the boys around you, offering what they think is love. . . . Poof! They know not the meaning of the word they glibly speak! It is for me to teach you, Mercy, what that signifies—what is the length and depth and breadth and height of that little word of but four letters!

"Mercy, I am here to teach you! Come to me, my love, my bride! Never fear or falter! That which you know not yet I will teach you. It shall be my life's task—sweet, joyous task! And I shall do it so well! Mercy, do you know how a Dare can love? Then I will show you! Come to me! I am for you—you are for me! That was ordained for us before the foundation of the world! It is useless to resist, for you are mine! Your heart is telling you so! And the heart never lies. . . ."

"Pardon me, Captain Dare, my heart is telling me that

228 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

it was in just such burning words as these that you sought to win away the love of Lilius Dare from the husband she had wedded, the husband she loved, the husband who called you and treated you as his friend."

She had done it now ; she had hurled her bomb. In a breathless silence she awaited the explosion.

Already he had moved a little nearer. She had felt as by an infallible instinct that unless she contrived to bring about some drastic change in the situation, the man would seek to clasp her in his arms, and by the sheer hot force of physical contact, which plays so great a part in the wooing of the fierce male animal, break down her defences, baffle resistance, and bend her to his will.

She was not afraid, however ; for Mercy was a Quentin, and the spirit she had inherited from a long line of ancestors was a match even for the fierce determination of a Dare. Also the great dog was beside her. He would never suffer a hand to be laid upon her contrary to her will. But Mercy had no desire that the dog should be forced to act as her defender. For she had a conviction that she had well named her companion, and that the canine Dare like the human Dare would be hard to hold back, if once the word had been given, and his anger let loose. There was something akin in both natures, some elemental force which would be curbed with difficulty, and it would be hard to gauge its power.

So in speaking she rose to her feet, keeping her hand firmly upon the head of the hound, who was beginning to utter low and smothered growls. And having uttered her speech she stood looking the man in the face with unflinching courage, though utterly uncertain what next he might say or do.

It was as though a thundercloud had darkened the face of Captain Dare. What tumult of baffled rage and hot passionate wrath worked in his spirit with devastating power, she would never know ; though in some undefinable way she was made aware of the fierce cataclysm sweeping over him ; for the air about them seemed charged with electric tension.

"So you have heard—that lying tale—told by a false woman—to condone her—infidelity."

"I have heard the true story of a life which your cruelty and falsehood devastated—from the lips of a woman who suffered through you the two most woeful wrongs which it is possible that she could suffer: loss of her husband's love and trust: loss of the care of her only child."

Then came the red flash of devilish malignity.

"Would that I had done the brat to death by inches—I would if the mother had been there to see!"

Then Lilius had been right. Mercy felt herself shudder as she turned away. She gave him one long look of comprehension, and of scorn.

"Good-morning, Captain Dare; you will understand why I do not ask you to my house to-day. And if in the future we may meet as neighbours from time to time, I ask you to remember that I am no longer the child Mercy; but Miss Quentin, of Quentin Easter."

Without offering her hand she turned away. Behind her the dog paced slowly, his eyes very red, his tail lashing with that curious movement which betrayed anger and suspicion.

After them gazed a man whose face was distorted by fury.

"I will find a way of revenge yet!" he muttered.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A DAINTY VENGEANCE

It was a relief to Mercy to feel that there was no danger of visits at Quentin Easter from Captain Dare. Every day she expected to hear that the House of Dare was empty once more, and that its owner was off to the ends of the earth.

Lady Sarah alone was in Mercy's confidence ; and she only because her shrewd old eyes had seen enough to put her on the alert. She knew what had been the meaning of a number of Captain Dare's questions upon the occasion of his visit during the girl's absence. She knew that he had called at the house early upon the day after the young mistress's return. Mercy had come in from the woods in a grave and thoughtful mood. The same evening after she had been to see that her grandmother was comfortable for the night, the old lady had drawn her down to encircle her with a warm embrace.

" I am glad that that is over, Mercy, my love."

And Mercy, who had never forgotten her child's lesson ; and who was very slow to repeat to others words spoken which had not been meant for their ears, was glad that this secret had been divined without its having passed her lips.

" Oh, grandmother, I could not—I could not ! Even if I had not known about Lilius—it could never have been. He is a man to shrink from—not to love."

" I agree with you, my dear. Yet sometimes I think that if I were to be young again, I should be conscious of his charm. Do you know what I mean ? "

" Yes—I think I do. That is the worst of it. He might have been so different ! "

" Then be thankful that you have eyes to see and a heart

to understand. It will be well for him not to come here too much. You and I both know why."

Mercy did right well. For many days she watched Alys, wondering a little that she made no comment upon the lack of visits from Captain Dare. But perhaps she understood; for she was certainly a little distraught. She was also more lovely than ever, Mercy decided, and Joyce was of the same opinion.

"Alys, I am going to paint you next," she told her. "I don't know what has come to you. I suppose it is through being well again; but you look—what shall I call it, Mercy?—sort of glorified! When I have finished Colonel Quentin's portrait for Lady Sarah, I shall do yours—for the Academy!"

Alys laughed a little tremulous laugh, and declared that only famous people hung on the walls of the Academy; whereupon Joyce told her to go find a fairy prince and marry him! At this the sensitive colour flamed in the girl's cheeks, making Joyce exclaim:

"My dear, you are simply too lovely for words when you look like that! Aunt Marjorie, have you got paints in your tubes that would do justice to such a blush?"

But neither Mercy nor Joyce, each in her way of an open and candid nature, ever for one moment divined the cause of that burning glow upon the cheeks of Alys.

Mercy loved to run down daily to the Little Old House; for she was very much interested in the portrait of her uncle, which was being painted in Miss Marjorie's studio, in full hunting-rig. For the Colonel had consented to take the hounds, the mastership of which had fallen vacant. It worked in with his scheme for horse-breeding, and helping farmers to follow his example; and at Quentin Easter every encouragement was to be given to this most important branch of agricultural energy.

Already Mercy and her uncle were in debate about the advisability of offering prizes for the best colts of the season reared upon the farms in the district; and Joyce was ardently looking forward to the opening of the season, now so near at hand, when she would accompany Mercy

232 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

to the meets, and follow the hounds with her at a discreet distance. She had been out cubbing already several times, to her great delight, and her spirited sketches of the day's sport were finding a market in many illustrated journals.

Now her portrait of the new M.F.H. was engrossing her, and Mercy was keenly interested. Joyce would have liked to "jo" him on horseback; but there were difficulties in the way. So the horse was to be shown in waiting at the open doorway in the background, and meantime the tall, well-knit, military-looking figure in the red coat, white breeches and long riding-boots was taking life under her clever fingers, and Mercy delighted to come down and watch, and take cognisance of a situation which she felt assured was growing up before her eyes, and which caused her great happiness and no little inward amusement.

Joyce was so beamingly certain that her hero (for such the Colonel might well be called) was secretly in love with Miss Marjoribanks; and to Mercy she would whisper all sorts of amusing nonsense anent the ways of elderly wooers! To her it seemed so natural: "They are both such dears!" she would declare. And into Mercy's eyes would creep that delicious little sparkle which all her friends loved to see; and she would gravely declare that it was all most interesting, and that she loved to watch it too!

Thus it came about that in these bright warm days of September, Mercy often thought that Alys was acting as reader and amanuensis to Lady Sarah, whilst Lady Sarah, whose eyesight was still good, and her correspondence not always heavy, would soon dismiss her young companion, and take for granted that she joined Mercy somewhere either about the gardens or at the Little Old House.

But in truth the girl made no effort to do this. For her magnet was elsewhere—that magnet which drew her by a power she had no desire to resist; and which made such a sweet and dangerous lure in her young life.

The first encounter had been accidental. It had taken place upon the very spot where Dare and Mercy parted, after things had been spoken on both sides which left a lasting scar.

The man could not keep away. It seemed to him that by the very force of his will, and strength of that passion in which love and hatred were now so closely blended, he must prevail upon her at last. He was a Dare—and Dares always won the victory in the end, however tardy the triumph might be.

Then she was a woman—and women were all alike ; they loved to be wooed. They only fled to be pursued ! To be sure, that had not been true in the case of one woman. Lilius had never come back. He had long ago supposed her dead. It was bad luck that she and Mercy should have met ; still more that they should have lighted upon that subject in conversation. Nevertheless, it was hard if a ghost from a past so remote should arise to stand between him and his desire of years ! And hot with such musings the " spirit in his feet " brought Rolfe Dare once again to the place where he had parted from Mercy—and he saw through the brushwood the flutter of a woman's dress, and with the shout of a victor he leaped into the arena, and caught the girlish form in his arms !

And it was not Mercy !

But though it was not the coveted prize, it was a sweet girlish creature, who gasped with amaze, uttered a little cry of terror—and then lay for a moment white and passive on his breast.

The shock, the strange mingling of rapture, wonder and fear, for a moment robbed Alys of all power either of resistance or of real consciousness. That something immense and unthinkable had happened she knew ; but all else was hidden by the mist that whirled before her eyes, and made the whole world dim.

When she came fully to her senses again she was still upheld by those strong arms which had gripped her close ; and a vibrant voice whispered in her ear :

" Little Ladybird, little Ladybird, have I caught you, instead of that wild sparrow-hawk ? "

A heart on the rebound ! Most of the old adages contain a shrewd truth. This man had come to woo, but come with that in his heart which savoured not altogether of love. His

234 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

pride had been wounded, his will thwarted. Though he desired Mercy with fierce desire, he almost hated her. He felt that he wanted her that he might crush her and wound her, as she had wounded him.

And now instead of Mercy, with her young stateliness, her severity of glance, her biting words, here in her stead was a lovely yielding creature, with radiant eyes, lighted by love's lamp—for Captain Dare knew well whence that shining came; he had seen it all too often—ready to cling to him, ready to listen to him, ready to worship, trust and love. . . .

Well, why not? Had he not told himself a thousand times that the day for marriage had come. Unless he married, all the Dare property must pass of necessity to Colin; and at this moment he was furious with that vanished woman who had been Colin's mother. Her brat should not succeed to the old House of Dare and its acres, to the fairly sufficient revenue which the house property in the adjacent town still yielded. He would marry, and bequeath it all to a son of his own. Colin would be done out of that hope at least. He was well-to-do now. That Sicilian property was going to bring him affluence. This little delicate maiden—well, she would make a dainty bride—and would be daintily set in the hot glow of the southern sunshine which was already luring him back.

Why not? Why not?—and again why not?

And suddenly he found himself pressing kisses upon that delicate little face, and those shining eyes. And his kisses were returned, tentatively at first, then warmly—then passionately. Ah, the statue was warming to life—and he—the artist—had done the deed! That which was unworthy the name of love, yet so often stands for it in the affairs of life, sprang up in this man's breast. He strained the fragile form more closely to him.

"Little Ladybird, are you going to give yourself to me?"

"Do you want me—Dare?"

"I wanted another—you knew it. But she will have none of me; and my heart is hungry! Have you come to fill it, child?"

"Can I fill it? Will you let me try?"

"With all my heart; for it is ill work to prowl these woods like a famished wolf. Little love, are you afraid of me—that I shall eat you up?"

She laughed a soft, happy, tremulous laugh; she was unspeakably lovely—and more; she was the friend of the woman who had flouted him. Mercy had taken this fair girlish creature under her protection; so much artless Alys had told him but a few days back. Well then, let her try and protect her friend from the advances of the man she had despised and rejected!—the man whom she believed capable of cruelty, baseness and devilish practices.

His eyes glowed; his heart swelled. Here indeed was a dainty vengeance! Through Alys he could some day strike at Mercy; and meantime he could mightily enjoy his facile conquest.

But he must walk warily; the prey must not be snatched from his grasp. Not too soon must any know of that secret hidden by the woodlands.

"Meet me to-morrow, sweetheart," he would whisper; and on the morrow the same wooing words: "Meet me to-morrow, heart of my heart!"

And so the glowing days slipped onwards one by one—and Mercy never knew—Mercy never guessed!

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SWEPT AWAY

YET by mid-September Mercy could not fail to be aware that some process of evolution and expansion was going on within the spirit of Alys Ainsley—development which made for so marked an increase in the girl's beauty, animation and charm that no one who saw her could fail to mark it; and Joyce as she laughingly reminded her of her threat to paint her portrait added mischievously one day about this time:

"Mind you keep these good looks till I am ready, little Alys! Is it the effects of summer, or life at Quentin Easter? Or have you fallen in love?"

Alys sought to laugh; but Mercy saw the flood of rosy crimson which flooded her face before she turned lightly away to pluck a flower in the border, and suddenly a cold sense of misgiving assailed her, and set her mind at work with energy and awakened anxiety.

Suddenly she realised that she had seen less of Alys latterly than she had been wont to do. To be sure the girl's improved health might account for much. Alys wandered through the grounds and woods without fatigue now, and came home with spoil to show whither her steps had led her.

But in past days she had not been fond of solitude. She had always gravitated towards others, and liked to share with Mercy or some other friend the occupation of the moment. Now it seemed that Lady Sarah had not been engrossing much of Alys's time. When her family was dispersed for the summer and early autumn weeks of travel, the old lady's correspondence suffered marked diminution, and latterly her eyes had been giving her little trouble, and she had been reading more to herself.

September was always a busy month to the chatelaine of Quentin Easter. Many leases and agreements wanted careful consideration; there was always a certain amount of change at this season which involved a large amount of thought and work. Mercy took her full share of both of these, and with her uncle and the old steward spent a good deal of time in the office-room in the rear of the house. Thus she knew less than usual as to what happened elsewhere, and now a sudden sense of uneasiness gripped her hard. For although she had not seen Captain Dare again since that parting in the woodlands, she knew that he was still in the neighbourhood.

That night she sought Alys in her room, after she had settled Lady Sarah and left her to sleep. Would Alys be in bed and asleep also? But no. There was a gleam of light beneath her door, and when Mercy entered, in response to the accorded permission, Alys was standing near the window, with loosened hair and shining eyes, robed in her soft white lace-trimmed gown—a lovely vision of girlish beauty, looking as though she had just stepped back from the open window and the contemplation of the starlit night.

Something in her aspect appealed poignantly to Mercy. How sweet and frail and ethereal she looked—a fairy-like creature made for tenderness and caresses . . . possessed of a nature easily won, perhaps too easily deceived.

"Darling, I have come to you to-night: not to ask questions. At least, only this one. Little Alys, have you anything to tell me?"

Alys uttered a low soft laugh, and suddenly hid her face upon Mercy's shoulder. Mercy felt all the ecstatic quivering of the slim frame her arms encircled.

"Oh, Mercy, Mercy . . . I promised . . . that it should be . . . a secret!"

"You promised—Captain Dare."

This was not a question. It was the statement of a fact as clear and patent to Mercy now as though it had been told her in set phrase.

"Ah, I know you do not like him. I know you sent him

238 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

away! I know he wanted you first! How could he help it? I do not know how he ever came to think of poor little me—he so grand, so great, so good. . . .”

“Good!”

“Well, good enough for me!” flashed Alys, clinging to Mercy, hiding her face still, but obsessed by the glamour and the glory of that passion of love which had entered her heart for the first time. “I am not like you, Mercy, with all the world at my feet! With as many lovers as you could want, with everything that life has to offer! And he has given me just what I do so long for—the love of his big, proud, stormy heart! Not his first love—he never professes that. And he is not ashamed to speak the truth, and I am not afraid to hear it! He wanted you! He came for you. But you despised him, and sent him away. And he turned to me! Oh, never mind when or where or how! He came to me—and I love him. I don’t care what he has done in the past. I don’t care whether Mrs Dale’s story is true or false. Probably there are two sides to it—like there are to every story in the world. I don’t care. I do not expect perfection. I am not perfect myself. He knows that; and he never poses as a saint. We are ready to take one another for better, for worse. Oh, Mercy, Mercy, Mercy—if you could only know and understand how absolutely happy I am!”

What use for words? What would avail remonstrance or argument? One of Mercy’s qualities was to understand when all such endeavours would be futile.

Closely she held Alys in her arms, kissing the soft hair and half-averted face. At last that glowing face was lifted, and a pair of soft dark eyes looked into hers.

“You are not angry, Mercy?”

“Not angry, Alys, but very, very sorry.”

“Ah, but that is so foolish—so needless! Mercy, you do not understand him—and perhaps I do not either. But when you love that does not matter! Love works a miracle. . . . Oh, I don’t know how to say it! You *know* that it will be right—that nothing else matters! I have been waiting in the shadows all my life; now the sunshine

has come. That is all I can say—that is all that matters!"

Before Mercy left Alys that night she held her fast in her arms, and spoke grave, tender words to her.

"Alys dear, we none of us know what the future may hold for us. But remember this. If your life does not turn out what you expect; if . . . trouble should come . . . or fear . . . or tragedy in any form . . . I am always your friend. Never forget that. If you want me, come to me, or send for me. Rely always on my love for you. I am your friend now: I shall be your friend always. Always remember that."

As Mercy sought her room, and stood beside her own open window, she spoke half aloud:

"That poor child, that poor child! How right grandmother was about her! I can do nothing; she can do nothing. There is only just one chance. Can Lilies do anything when she comes back? Could she open eyes that are resolutely blind?"

Out in the woodlands Alys met her lover, and the feel of those strong arms round her drove every lingering misgiving away.

"Oh, Rolfe, how strong you are! Your arms are like iron! Big boy, will you be angry with what I have to tell you? Mercy has found out! I was afraid she would. She has such far-seeing eyes."

The iron arms closed vicelike round her. There was a tremor in the voice of the strong man, whom Alys loved to dub her "big boy."

"Does she think she is going to snatch you away from me?"

"I think she knows that I would not be snatched. But oh, Rolfe, she would like to part us, I know. Not out of anything but kindness. Mercy could not be jealous or spiteful. But she thinks that you are a bad man . . . as though I cared!"

His laugh and the smother of his kisses was as balm to her spirit; she clung to him with all her slight strength.

240 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"It is all the doing of Mrs D—I mean Earle! It is her story which has set Mercy against you. . . ."

"Mrs Earle?"

"Yes, yes, you know! Lilius Dare she was once—in India—and then she called herself Mrs Dale, and lived for years and years with her sisters in Oxfordshire, where we were at school. That is how Mercy came to know her. And now she has married Mr Earle—the Rector here. They are away on their wedding tour. But they will be back in a fortnight now. . . ."

"What!"

It was almost a shout. Alys with her hands against his breast pushed him a little farther away that she might look into his face. What she saw there she could not interpret, but it was obvious that he was much moved.

"That woman—the Rector's wife!—coming back here—to live!"

Then suddenly his mood changed, and a great rolling laugh went booming through the woods, as he gripped Alys by both shoulders, holding her not ungently, yet as in a vice.

"Little love, you and I must bestir ourselves! We will have no clerical espionage or forbidding of the banns. Alys, are you ready to give yourself to me—now—at once?"

"Rolfe, I should love to!"

"You don't want flummery or fuss?—the trousseau and the cake?—the presents and the old slippers and rice?"

"I want nothing but you, Rolfe—nothing but my own big boy!"

He snatched a kiss from her parted, quivering lips. She was shaking and trembling in his grasp like a snared bird; but it was the agitation of rapture—and he knew it.

"And all I want is to have my bird safe, to fly away to the golden south with it! To cage it in that fair spot which I have made ready—where winter never comes, where the sea is always sparkling and blue, where the hours are dreamed away in the spicy fragrance of sunny gardens—such a garden as Solomon wrote about and called his love

to share—such a garden as you and I, my beloved, will share together ! ”

Her laugh was half a sob ; her answering kisses were sweet upon his lips.

“ Alys, have you any relations in London ? ”

“ Yes, an uncle and aunt, who have never been kind to me.”

“ Never mind that. Go to them next Wednesday—pretend a summons, a visit for shopping—anything you like ! I come that same evening to corroborate the tale you will tell. When a rich man comes wooing, he is always welcomed ! On Thursday morning we go to the nearest church, and are married there by the special licence which I shall have ready. You are of age. There is no trouble about that. By Thursday afternoon, my bird, our wings will be spread. We shall be on the way to the sunny south—and our life of love beside the tideless sea ! ”

“ Oh, Rolfe ! ”

It seemed too wonderful—too beautiful. He bent her to his will as the blacksmith bends the white-hot metal fused at his furnace. He said it was to be done. She followed his wishes without a doubt or a fear.

Mercy coming in one evening at dusk from a long afternoon spent surveying some farm property, found that in her absence a telegram had come for Alys summoning her to town—and that she was gone.

Her heart sank ; but she could not say that this was a blind. Alys had kinsfolk ; she might be sent for. . . .

On the morrow was no letter, and she had left no address behind. But upon the second day there came a few hasty lines :

“ DARLING MERCY,—Forgive me. I could not help it ! I write in the train, whilst Rolfe gets us papers. We were married this morning, and are starting for Sicily. I owe all my happiness to you, and I shall love you always.

“ ALYS DARE.”

CHAPTER XXXIX

IN THE STUDIO

JOYCE was at work upon the portrait of Colonel Quentin, or rather upon the background, in which she took considerable interest, for the design was her own, and she was not quite sure that, artistically speaking, it was correct; yet she had set her heart upon attempting to carry it out after her own ideas.

The tall soldierly figure in hunting-garb was represented as standing in a panelled hall, the dark oak, illuminated somehow from above, showing off the huntsman to full advantage. Joyce had caught with her customary happy knack the alert and vigilant expression of the handsome face, combining with that look a great kindness and humorous geniality which was exceedingly life-like. As a likeness it was excellent; and the upright carriage of the tall frame was equally characteristic of the ex-officer, who looked in his portrait, as he did in life, a good deal too young to be a retired colonel. But then there had been the war.

The figure did not occupy the centre of the big canvas. It stood somewhat to one side, and to the right was the open door, through which poured a flood of autumnal sunshine. And dark against this golden glow was the bulk of the horse in waiting for his rider, the shadow of the creature lying long and black athwart the polished floor of the hall.

"I must try to do it," Joyce had declared, "for that is how I see it always. If it's a failure, the canvas can be cut, and then there will be Colonel Quentin standing in the middle—and nobody will be any the wiser that anything else was intended."

They gave her her way, for Joyce's bold experiments often succeeded better than critics expected, and it seemed as

though this one would also be numbered amongst her successes.

For Joyce had not watched Miss Marjoribanks for nothing, nor studied her own particular achievement under her kind and discriminating eyes. She too knew now how to get a radiance into sunshine, a quivering glory into atmosphere, which seemed to make her pictures live. And for days she had worked at the stables of Quentin Easter, where she could obtain just the effect of light behind the horse which was all important for her ; and where a splendid old hunter, once ridden by a dead and gone master, posed for her with a magnificent patience and docility which made them devoted friends.

But at a certain hour Joyce and her canvas were always back at the studio, because on a sunny day, through the open south door, she got exactly that liquid radiance upon polished boards which she was so determined to convey in her representative portrait.

And so intent was she upon her task on this brilliant late September day that she heard no warning of approaching footsteps, and it was only when a shadow fell directly across her slanting strip of sunlight that she knew her privacy invaded.

" Oh, Colonel Quentin, have you come to sit ? "

He entered as one who has a right, and stood for a moment behind her, watching the skilful brushes at work.

" It marches, it marches," he said. " You are going to prove to all your critics that you are right and they are wrong. On a winter's day it would make a cold man warm to stand and look at that glow."

She gave him a bright responsive look.

" I am so glad you say that. Because, though you were always my friend about the picture, I am not sure that you believed it was going to come off my way."

" If I did not believe exactly in the picture—I believed in you ; and that what you had undertaken you would accomplish."

" That's what is so nice about you ! You give one confidence. And since it was your picture, if you hadn't liked

244 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

it, I should not have dared to persist in my own way. Colonel Quentin, have you come from Quentin Easter 'on your way' here? Have they heard from Alys yet?"

"Yes, I came to tell you. Alys is married."

"Married!" Joyce wheeled round, a great amazement in her eyes. She put down palette and brushes, for the light was westering a little too much for her purpose now, "Alys married! Now I begin to understand! Is it Captain Dare?"

"Yes."

The soldier's face was grave. These girl friends of Mercy's, who had been so much at Quentin Easter at different times, were regarded by him something in the light of youthful kinswomen. He called them by their Christian names. They had been known in moments of expansion to call him Uncle Alec. Joyce had done this oftener in the past than she did it now. But she was always conscious of his watchful kindness wherever any of them were concerned, and she felt that if ever she were in perplexity or doubt here was a man who would help her to the best of his ability and that this would be a most excellent quality to depend upon.

"And she did not tell—even Mercy!"

"Not that she was to marry him so quickly. Mercy knew that they had met . . . that they were betrothed . . ."

"She never told me!"

"It was for Alys to tell, if she wished it known. Mercy had somehow surprised her secret. She was in hopes that—something might happen to avert this consummation. Probably Dare anticipated possible resistance, and pressure brought to bear . . ."

"One could never do anything with Alys. She was like a bit of india-rubber. You might make any amount of seeming impression; but directly the pressure was removed—you know what I mean—she just sprang back to her original shape!"

Colonel Quentin was looking very grave.

"You don't like it!" said Joyce quickly.

"No one could like such a marriage. The man's past is

not clean. No one knows how he spends his time. A few gallant acts in warfare do not wipe out the record of a lifetime. And he was not long in South Africa. He came as a free-lance, and left at his own will. He leaves behind him an atmosphere of mystery. And he is old enough to be her father. . . ."

"Do you think that matters?" asked Joyce. "I mean, if that were all?"

"What do you think yourself?" he asked; and suddenly the light of those steadfast Quentin eyes was bent rather searchingly upon the gravely animated face of the artist girl, who had reached woman's estate without having lost the ardours or the charm of her impulsive girlhood.

"I don't think that age matters one bit, one way or the other, if only people trust each other through and through, and there are no black patches, no dismal swamps which they dare not traverse together. Do you know what I mean? I think if a man has had a clean past, a splendid record, and is all that a soldier or a man should be"—Joyce, her hands busy with her painting tubes, made a little stumble and pause, but quickly took up the word and continued—"then nothing else would matter one bit. He might marry a woman old enough to be his aunt, or a girl young enough to be his daughter, and I don't think it would matter one little bit. It isn't that which I should mind in the least for Alys. She wants somebody strong to take care of her. We all do. It's our nature. But a man like Captain Dare . . . with a face like his . . . and a mystery behind him. . . . Oh, the little fool—the little fool!"

"And they have started for Sicily together. I suppose they will winter there!"

"What has he to do with Sicily?"

"I do not know. Dare's affairs are none of my business. I have heard whispers and rumours—but one does not repeat things unless there is more to go upon. It may be all right. He has property there without doubt."

Over Joyce's bright face a great gravity had stolen—an expression almost strange in its depth of compassion and anxious foreboding.

246 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"To a strange country—with that strange wild man—and he with that dark passage (I do not know it all) in his life already! Oh, poor little foolish Alys!"

"Let us hope that her weakness—her infatuation—what you like to call it—will appeal to the gallantry of his nature. No man is all bad. And perhaps—he loves her."

In the girl's eyes something seemed to glitter.

"Oh, I hope so . . . I hope so! But Alys ought to have known better. He was not the only splendid man she had seen! Oh, she should have known better!"

The eyes which glistened with sudden unwonted tears, drawn forth by a quick rush of conflicting feelings, were fixed upon the face of the portrait before which she stood. The strong, kindly, handsome face of the soldier seemed gazing back at her from the canvas. At that moment Colonel Quentin stepped to her side, and laid his hand upon her shoulder:

"Joyce," he said. "Little Joyce!"

Miss Marjoribanks was in her garden somewhat later when she heard a firm familiar tread on the path behind.

She was little changed from the kindly eyed, brisk-voiced companion of Mercy's girlhood. A little more silver in the curly hair, still worn short, and, a few more lines in the characteristic face with its expression half whimsical, half penetrating and wholly lovable

"Ha, Colonel, 'on your way' to or from Quentin Easter, I suppose?" And the bright eyes twinkled as mischievously as those of a schoolboy. "Mercy has just brought the news to me. Poor little foolish child! But I take it that you are not at this moment thinking of Alys Dare."

"I am not. Though I came with my head full of her. Miss Marjoribanks—congratulate me!"

"Ah! Then you have done it—at last!"

She held out her hands, and he took them; but his face was grave behind its brightness.

"Tell me, have I done wrong? She is so young, and I . . ."

"Joyce is old enough to know her own mind; and you

carry your years like—a Quentin! In this case it is not a leap in the dark. I congratulate you both!"

"I have not taken you by surprise, I think?"

"Surprise! Do you think that I am blind? The only surprise you have occasioned is that you did not both of you know your minds a year ago. I think that Joyce did!"

"And I knew mine two years before that! But . . ."

Miss Marjoribanks laughed.

"Faint heart never won fair lady. Now I am going to the child. She has no mother, you know."

In the studio stood Joyce, lost in her dream. Miss Marjoribanks stood within the doorway and held out her arms.

Into that warm embrace Joyce hurled herself with characteristic energy.

"Oh, Aunt Marjorie, Aunt Marjorie, I am so happy I don't know how to contain myself. He has told you?"

"My dear, he has. But it was no news to me."

"Oh, Aunt Marjorie—do you mean—you guessed?"

The laugh was infectious. Joyce had to join in it.

"Oh, Miss Marjorie . . . but I thought it was . . . you!"

"What a precious little goose you must have been then, my dear!"

CHAPTER XL

COLIN

"GENERAL MUGGS, you are coming with me to meet your master! Do you understand, darling? You and I are going to the station just by our little selves. And Colin is coming! Muggy, will you remember him? Oh, I hope you will. But he was such a little boy when he went away. And now he is a big man and twenty-six! And you are a very old and very wise dog, and I have kept my word to you master! You are not dead, and I am not married. . . ." And Mercy laughed that little sudden spontaneous laugh of hers, which was like the ripple of sunny waters. She bent her head over the old dog and laid her cheek against his wide brindled head. After which he followed her into the carriage, and settled himself with great dignity upon the seat beside her.

It was an exquisite day in mid-December. There was just a touch of frost in the air, yet the sun—low in the heavens through it was—seemed to shine as with a promise of spring. The sky was a tender blue, little fleecy clouds stained with crimson as they neared the southern horizon floated there, or massed together in a soft fleece. Bird notes were heard in the woodlands again. A delicate frosting lay here and there upon the sleeping fields and north banks. It was winter's sleep, just beginning to stir with the faint breath of a coming springtide, which in this soft West Country might be looked for almost as soon as the year turned.

And Colin was to come to-day. And Mercy had started forth to meet him.

The Rectory boasted of no carriage; yet even had it done so, this was Mercy's prerogative. He was coming as Mr Earle's guest . . . he was coming to a house where his own

mother reigned in happy married life such as was a revelation to her. And he knew nothing of this! That was what was so strange.

Earlier in the day Lilius and Mercy had held consultation together as to what should be said and done.

"Do you want him to know before he sees you?" Mercy had asked; and the quivering mother had hesitated, seeming to ask for Mercy's counsel and casting vote.

"I don't know. Arnold leaves it to me. He thinks perhaps it would be better to prepare him. Sometimes I want to tell him myself—and then again I want him to know..."

"Shall we leave it then to circumstances?" was Mercy's suggestion. "We shall have a seven miles' drive, and there will be a great deal that we shall say in that time. If the way opens—if anything seems to lead up to it—Arnold's marriage, or whatever it might be—then I will tell him—just the bare truth. If not—well, perhaps you had better do the telling later on. Will you leave it to me? Can you trust me, Lilius?"

"That is just what I wanted to ask of you—to use your own discretion. Arnold says the same. You were always such a wise child! 'The qualities of Mercy'—he so often says those words! And I know what he means..."

So Mercy sat in the great open carriage with the brindled dog at her side, and Dare in close attendance, waiting for the arrival of the signalled express which was to bring her childhood's playmate back to her.

With a rush and a clatter it dashed into the station. Mercy's heart beat a little fast as she watched after a minute or two the stream of passengers beginning to file out.

There he was!

Instantly she knew him. That tall bronzed man, with the clean-shaven face, a little narrow save at the brow, with those finely-cut, decisive features stamped with the characteristics of the House of Dare. Eyes which seemed to look through objects near at hand, and scan wide and distant horizons; the upright carriage of the soldier, with the long easy stride of the wanderer through trackless wastes. This was the man she had come to meet.

250 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

Then rather an odd thing happened; for the huge hound, by nature suspicious of strangers, made a sudden forward step and thrust up his great head under the traveller's hand.

At the same moment Mercy leaned out of the carriage and spoke his name:

"Colin! I am here."

"Mercy!"

"And Private Muggs, exalted to the rank of General."

Bareheaded he stood beside the carriage and looked down at them both; and Mercy felt as though she wanted to put her arms round his neck and kiss him, as they had kissed at parting. Their hands met, and then he laid his left hand on the big head of the dog:

"Old chap, do you remember me?"

It seemed as though there were recollections, pleasant and intimate. No wild boundings or barkings—the General was almost too old for that kind of demonstration; and the place was a public one, and his dignity always perfect. But the thumping tail on the cushions, the rearing up beneath the friendly hand, the whole expression of the big blunt muzzle and the sagacious eyes all spoke a language of trust and affection.

"He knows you!" said Mercy, with shining eyes. "Get in, Colin, the cart will take your luggage. Oh, Colin, it is so good to see you again! Do you know it is nearly sixteen years since you went away?"

He took the seat opposite, so that he could watch her and her brindled comrade as they drove. He looked about him with those far-seeing eyes, and for a little while he scarcely spoke.

But Mercy talked without constraint. Changed as he was, this bronzed man was the Colin of the past. Toughened in fibre, his health established upon a firm basis, all the hesitation and timidity knocked out of him; still he was her childhood's playmate. And though he was dark-eyed and wore the mask of the Dare features—yet he was like his mother! Startlingly like in some of his expressions. Again and again as she spoke of episodes in the past, death

or change, or the transient sorrows of her girlhood, a look would steal over his face and shine out of his silent eyes which almost made her exclaim aloud. This likeness to his mother it was which had given to his Dare face a delicacy and a beauty that differentiated it from the rugged type from which it had been hewn. How well Mercy now understood that vein of timid shrinking and nervous terror which had been the nightmare of his childhood, and against which he fought with a fierce and desperate energy and courage! Well, he had conquered it now. That face held no suggestions of the latent weakness of his earlier years. He had not struggled in vain.

"Colin," said Mercy at last, "why did you never come home?"

"I have no home to come to, Mercy."

"Not Quentin Easter?" There was a note of reproach in her voice. "I thought, when you were twenty-one that you would be sure to come."

"I was in Australia then. I was with a man who only wanted a little more capital to make a good thing of his place. My money when I got it was enough. He knew what he was about. The place sold for a big sum. I got my money back—with interest. I should have come home then—but for the war. I went off to fight."

"I know. I have heard about that. But the war has been over a long while now."

"Yes; but the spell of the veldt got its grip of me—and the love of adventure too. I joined forces with a man prospecting in Rhodesia. We made a good thing out of that too. I suppose I am lucky. And he died quite suddenly last year, and left his pile to me. Not a wonderful pile; but there was the property too. I sold that fairly well, and now I am free."

"And you have come home!"

"Yes, to see you, Mercy, and the old place. But after that I am going to India."

"To India, Colin? But why?"

"To try and trace my mother. I should have gone before but for this chance of making money—for her. It may be a

252 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

wild-goose chase ; but now that I know—what I know—I cannot leave a stone unturned."

Mercy was trembling a little.

"What do you know, Colin ?"

"I heard the tale from an old Indian officer who was fighting through the war. My name attracted his notice ; and he told me of my father—things I had never known. And I asked him had he known my mother—of whom I had never been told a word. I had a little trouble in getting him to speak ; but in the end he told me everything he had ever known that he could remember. She did not die, as I had always supposed. There was some mystery ; and my cousin Rolfe was mixed up in it. That was plain enough. She disappeared. But not with him ! Don't think that of her. I believe it was some evil on his part which drove her away. I am going to sift that matter to the bottom. I have paved the way. I sent a fellow out to make inquiries. I am going to follow myself. Mercy, what is it ? Why do you look like that ?"

"Because, Colin, you will not have to go to India to find or trace your mother ; for I am taking you to her to-day !"

"Mercy !"

"Your mother is waiting for you at the Rectory, Colin ; for she is the wife of Mr Earle !"

Speechlessly he gazed at her, and she spoke on in that frank and eager way which carried him back to the happy days of childhood, when Mercy's vivid imaginings had been such a factor in their days' diversions. But this was no fairy romance that she was voicing now.

"Colin, your mother shall tell you the story of her life in India. I will tell you what happened after your father died, and Captain Dare, your guardian, took you away with him. She went away by herself for a time ; and then came back to her sisters. She was at the school where I spent several years, and we grew to be friends, though she was one of the mistresses. I knew she had had a sorrowful life. I was very sorry for her. And I came to know that the name of Dare stirred her strangely. After a long time

the way opened for her to come here. Something in the place—something which she could not help—compelled her to tell her story to Mr Earle first, and afterwards to us. She will tell it to you herself. You know that our Mr Earle is Rector here—it was he who gave us news of you and put us on your track. You knew all that—but not that he was married. Colin, he is married to—your mother ! ”

Colin's eyes flashed.

“ Then he believes in her ? ”

“ We all believe in her. She may have made mistakes in her life ; but she never did a great wrong.”

“ I knew it ! I knew it. She did no wrong ; but she was cruelly wronged. And the man who wronged her and blasted her life was—Rolfe Dare ! ”

The great dog running beside the carriage, hearing the sound of his name, suddenly lifted his muzzle and uttered a deep sonorous bay. Something in the subdued fierceness of Colin's tones and the boom of the dog's bell-like voice caused a little thrill to run through Mercy's veins.

She was glad that the Rectory gate loomed up into view. At that gate stood a woman's form. The carriage drew up. Mercy was down almost before Colin could offer his hand.

“ Lillas,” she said, with a little catch in her voice, “ I have brought you back—your son.”

With a little sobbing cry the mother opened her arms, and the next moment she was sobbing on the breast of her son.

CHAPTER XLI

CHRISTMAS

It was on Christmas Day morning, from the big Quentin Easter pew, that Mercy felt she had her first real view of Colin Dare—her erstwhile childhood's comrade, returned as a man.

He sat beside his mother in the Rectory pew full in her sight. And something in the transfigured face of Lilius Earle brought the glint of tears into Mercy's sympathetic eyes.

Was this indeed the pale, sad, wistful woman she had known as Mrs Dale? It was hard to believe it. The face was so full of content, nay of joy—joy deep and full and without alloy—that "transfigured" was the only word which seemed commensurate with the change.

And beside her was her goodly son, whose face Mercy studied from time to time with an interest which sought no disguise.

These days since his arrival had been such full and crowded ones, that although she had met him daily, although he had done yeoman's service the previous evening at Quentin Easter, when the tenantry and children had been entertained in time-honoured fashion, she had scarcely had a word with him alone, and lurking in the background of both their minds was the determination to wait till all the turmoil and merry-making was over—and then find one another once more.

And what was Mercy to find? What was it she saw?

A face very bronzed and somewhat deeply lined for its years: a face somewhat narrow below the wide brow, with clear-cut, decisive features, and deep-set eyes of arresting expression. Perfectly clean-shaved lips showed the mouth

of the man of resolution and firmness of will. A face not entirely easy to read, combining in remarkable fashion the Dare features with the delicacy of contour that characterised the mother-face so near his own. Melancholy there was in the glance of the steady eyes ; something which seemed to speak of a shadowed youth which had known little of boyhood's irresponsible glee and buoyant vitality. A face to attract and to awaken speculation and curiosity. This Mercy felt it to be. Yet she also felt that she held in her hands the clue to the enigma of his personality ; and that if others found him difficult to understand, she would not find this difficulty.

There was a big family gathering at Quentin Easter, as was the custom of the house, and little Frankie occupied his usual seat at Mercy's side. She loved to have the little fellow with her, teaching him the lore of the house, steeping him in those traditions in which she herself had grown up. She never said to him : " You will perhaps come after me here," but constantly she said it to herself. A Quentin, every inch of him, with something of extra charm and vivacity, drawn through the blood of the mother who was in part a daughter of the south. He adored his cousin Mercy, and was never happier than when she had him alone to Quentin Easter. She had not " adopted " him, as she once had suggested. His parents would have smiled at the notion, and Mercy was possessed of the well-balanced mind and sweet reasonableness that checked her from making any asseverations respecting her own future. Yet her outlook upon life did not change. Her heart, so full of quick sympathy for all, had never been touched by that enchantment and glamour which comes only when the One appears.

Love was to her as the very elixir of life ; but that Love which is the unique experience of a woman's soul had not come her way. Men had approached her with offers of devotion and protestations of love ; but she had no use for them. Gently and kindly, but with a firmness which shut the door upon hope, she had sent them away one after the other. And now she sat quietly studying the face of Colin Dare.

Quentin
view of
returned

all in her
of Lilius
pathetic

she had
The face
full and
ly word

ce Mercy
h sought

full and
m daily,
s evening
had been
rcely had
ground of
ill all the
find one

saw ?
ed for its
row, with
arresting
ne mouth

256 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

A large house-party sometimes makes for freedom to the hostess; and so it was with Mercy upon Christmas Day.

As she set out in the clear frosty shining of the December afternoon, to visit one or two of the sick and infirm amongst her tenants near at hand, she found Colin at her side, with General Muggs at his heels, as the big hound Dare was at her own.

Upon the day of Colin's return home, General Muggs, left at the Little Old House in passing, had gone up to Miss Marjoribanks, and laid his big muzzle upon her knee for some minutes, his eyes searching her face as though mutely telling her some tale. Then he had quietly walked off, and a few minutes later had appeared before the Rectory gates, through which he had paddled with quiet assurance till he found Colin in his mother's presence. Since that moment he had attached himself to his former little boy master with a tenacity of devotion which knew no eclipse. Only when Colin rode, or went too far afield for the aged dog, could he detach him from his side, and then only by asking him to "take care of his mistress." This name being accorded now to Liliass, of whom the son was taking such protective care.

Mercy's face lit up at sight of the pair.

"Oh, Colin, how did you know? How nice of you to come!"

"You told old Bill Hawker that you would visit his wife this afternoon. I made a mental note of that."

Mercy stooped to pat the head of his comrade.

"Dear old General—isn't it wonderful that he has never forgotten—that he knows you again—knows you for his real master? Animals are very wonderful, Colin—dogs particularly so. Oh, I am glad he has lived to see you come back. I began to be afraid . . ."

"Yes, I suppose I scarcely expected to see the old chap again—not till your letter came, Mercy. Do you remember the two half promises you made me once? . . . That Private Muggs would be alive when I came back again, and that you would not be married!"

They looked one at the other with the comrade light of childhood in their eyes ; with the laugh of perfect comradeship upon their lips. Mercy was suddenly and acutely aware that there was something very precious and quite unique in this friendship between herself and Colin.

" Well, and if the promise was rashly made, it has been kept, Colin. Muggs is alive, and I am not married ! "

" And perhaps that is really more wonderful than the other ! "

" Do you think so, Colin ? "

" Yes ; but I am very glad, Mercy."

Then she spoke to him with the candour of child to child

" Colin, I do not think that I want ever to be married."

" I do not ever intend to marry either, Mercy."

" Ah, Colin, tell me why ? "

" Because I am partly Dare. I would like for the Dares to die out."

" But you are not all Dare, Colin. You have so many things about you like your mother."

" Thank God for that," he said very seriously. " It has no doubt been my saving. But, Mercy, the Dare strain is terribly strong. And how do we know what might be in another generation ? Sometimes I think it is a kind of madness. And what is in the blood will come out suddenly in quite unexpected ways. You never know ! "

How that word brought it all back—the terror of the little boy's lonely childhood, when at the House of Dare he lived beneath the sway of the man upon whose mood no reliance could be placed. Mercy had seen these strange changes of mood in that wayward man. Only this past summer he had changed in a few short days from her own ardent lover to the husband of another woman. You could never tell. Colin was right there. But for him to put himself into the same category as his kinsman . . .

As though he read her thought he answered it :

" I hope that I am safe. But I will not risk it. And I will not pass that possible curse on to another. So, Mercy, I shall never have a wife. But I hope that I shall have many friends ; and most of all—you ! "

258 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

She turned towards him and held out both her hands, her soft eyes shining, her face aglow with sympathy, admiration—tenderness : that instinctive protective tenderness inherent in the woman when she is subtly aware of some element of sacrifice or devotion, or some touch of latent tragedy which she would fain dispel.

"But, Colin—how beautiful ! I mean that we can be friends, as we were when we were little children : that we understand each other as nobody else understands us ; and that we shall keep our beautiful friendship all through our lives ! "

He took her hands for a moment and pressed them, afterwards walking beside her, looking out far ahead, his finely-cut profile like the head of some conqueror upon a bronze medal.

"That is what I have dreamed of : that is what I want. The world is fond of saying that there can be no true friendship between man and woman. I would like for you and me, Mercy, to show them that such a thing can be possible."

"Of course it can, Colin. It will be a beautiful thing for us both. Though I have so many to love, there is always room for another. Colin, your place has never been filled in my life. It has always been waiting for you to come back and take ! "

"You shall never have cause to be sorry for that, Mercy," he said. "Now you understand why I am glad that I find you as you were. If you had had a husband—perhaps you would not have had room in your life for me."

"Yes, Colin, I should."

"But perhaps he would not have understood."

Then they laughed together over the futility of the discussion ; but the Lady of the Manor remarked succinctly :

"Do you think I could ever have married a man with as limited a nature or understanding as that ? "

"My cousin Rolfe would never have understood. . . ."

Mercy said nothing. Had Colin guessed anything ? But although he was her friend, honour muted her lips on this subject. What had passed between his kinsman and

herself was his secret as well as hers, and would never be divulged by her.

"You know that he is married, Colin?"

"I do. God help the poor girl he has made his wife!"

"Colin, she loves him; and she is so small and weak and tender. He could not be harsh towards her. A strong man must be chivalrous towards that which is dependent and weak."

"Until the wild Dare mood seizes him. Then—who knows?"

"Ah, Colin, you frighten me. I have tried to think her so happy by the sunny seas of Sicily!"

"Does she never write?"

"No; not even to give us an address. That is the strange part of it. But I have a feeling that she would write—if she were not happy."

Colin's face was dark and somewhat stern.

"He had no right to take her from all her friends—out there—where he has so many enemies."

"Enemies? How do you know that, Colin?"

"I have heard odd stories—rumours—no connected tale. What is he doing out there in Sicily? Where did he get that property—and how? He never had any great fortune—and was a spendthrift like all the Dares. How did he come by it?"

Mercy could not answer that question. A little shiver ran through her. How was it indeed with timid, gentle, clinging little Alys, alone in that far strange island with only Rolfe Dare beside her?

CHAPTER XLII

TWO BRIDES

In the springtide of the following year, in the week following Easter, Joyce Trevlyn and Alec Quentin were married from her uncle's house in London.

After the wedding and the brief honeymoon trip, the newly-wedded couple came back to London for a while; as it was considered well that Joyce should be presented and take a short London season as an introduction to her new life, whilst the old Manor Farm of Hallows Easter went through various processes of renovation and addition, with a view to the greater comfort of its inmates.

Joyce would not have had a thing changed; but Mercy was firm; and Mercy, as Lady of the Manor and Queen of Quentin Easter, as Joyce often dubbed her, claimed the right to make alterations and improvements upon her own property.

Colonel Quentin smiled and submitted. Colin volunteered to look after the horses and stud farm during the absence of the master, and to see to the workmen for Mercy. He was seriously thinking of joining with the Colonel in his horse-breeding enterprise, and was only waiting to know whether or not his kinsman would be willing to rent to him on lease the House of Dare and its surrounding lands, before definitely committing himself to some course of action.

But the answer to his letter, sent through the family lawyers to whom he had made application, was as yet unanswered. The men of business thought the arrangement admirable, as for long the house and land had been deteriorating for lack of habitation and enterprise. But Captain Dare was notably averse from business. He often left important letters unanswered for months. And meantime

Colin had had to possess his soul in patience, and join with Colonel Quentin in tentative fashion, learning, whilst often giving valuable aid and suggestion himself, dividing his time between the Rectory, where he had his headquarters, and Hallows Easter, where he was always a welcome guest.

He saw Mercy constantly. The pact of friendship, ratified upon that Christmas walk, became for both an integral factor in life. If his project with respect to the old family house proved abortive, Colin intended either renting the first Quentin Easter farmstead which changed its tenant, or else making purchase of a likely piece of land beyond its confines, and either building or adapting a house there for his own use and behoof, somewhere within easy reach of Mercy, and where he and Colonel Quentin could co-operate together in their undertaking.

So when Mercy and Lady Sarah went up to town to the house they had taken for the season—for the old lady to be under a specialist for treatment for a trouble with her eyes, and for Mercy to take some of the London gaieties under the auspices of different aunts—Colin remained behind to give an eye to many things during her absence. If Colin had not been a well-to-do man upon his own account, she would gladly have given him the office of land steward. As it was, he gave her valuable unpaid assistance, and many enterprises promising good results in the future were being set on foot at different farms, whose tenants were ready and willing to co-operate with the Lady of the Manor and this new Mr Dare, knowing well that whatever the result, they would not be permitted to suffer loss, and might stand to make considerable gain.

Both Lady Sarah and Mercy preferred a house of their own, and the independence of their joint life; though Lady Parminster was eager to welcome them to her Park Lane mansion where Mercy had made her début. However, they had no lack of pleasant society from the moment they arrived. There were Quintins and Mainwarings, Leighs and Maltbys to give them greeting. And from the first week onward Mercy saw her engagement-book filling up with por-

262 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

tentous rapidity, and had some ado to keep even her Sundays free.

But here she stood firm. All those instincts which Sally dubbed "the Puritan strain coming out in her" joined hands with her intense convictions that one day in the week should be kept free, as a breathing space, to take no higher ground; as a day of devotion and worship, from her own standpoint.

And often Colin came from Saturday till Monday, and together they visited the churches of old London, listened to famous or earnest preachers, sometimes wandered through "slumland" together, making plans for the reclamation of the land first, and then drafting thither such of the inhabitants of these festering regions as could be persuaded to leave them, or had a chance of doing well in a new life and other surroundings.

And Colin always understood! That was the charm of their friendship. His wider experiences and masculine instinct for detecting fallacy or humbug might lead him to conclusions different from hers. Yet Mercy's intuitions were particularly keen and clear; and there were occasions when she saw more clearly and truly than he. But whatever differences they might have in opinion, they always understood one another. They could talk with a freedom unusual between those of different sexes. This friendship seemed to Mercy like the crown upon her happiness. And if others saw in it the beginnings of a new relationship which might in some sort change the tenor of her life—well, they would learn their mistake in time!

Joyce came back from her wedding tour straight to Mercy in London. That was the arrangement; and it was a very joyous little bride who flung herself into Mercy's arms on a brilliant evening in May. It was the old Joyce, all brightness and vivacity, with a new sweetness added that was neither shy nor appealing, yet which graced her with a charm she had never possessed in such full measure before.

"Oh, Mercy, it has been all so delightful; and Alec is simply adorable! I think you ought to call him Alec now. It seems so funny for you to say uncle to my husband. Why

you ought to call me aunty!" And Joyce went off into one of her bell-like peals of mirth, and her tall husband coming in in time to hear the last words gently pulled her little ear and joined in the laugh himself.

They were so happy together—so wonderfully content with life and with each other. The Colonel was too well seasoned to wear his heart upon his sleeve; and Joyce had too keen a sense of humour to be "maudlin" over her husband. But their perfect satisfaction was good to see, and Mercy's heart rejoiced with them that all was so very well.

And then, quite unexpectedly, in the height of the brilliant season, Mercy was brought face to face with another bride.

It was Hugh Leigh who brought her the news: Hugh, who had come to understand that Mercy was not ever to be to him more than cousin and friend, yet who found a certain humorous satisfaction in the conviction that Viscount Dunmow, the dashing guardsman, and Jim Maltby, the rising experimentalist and inventor, were in the same case as himself, the three young men being excellent comrades and friends, and always at Mercy's service to command whenever she wanted either one or all.

It was at a great evening crush at some stately house that Hugh made his way to Mercy's side.

"Have you seen them?" he asked, as he reached her at last. "Do you know that the Dares are here?"

"The Dares?"

"Yes, the dark-faced Captain of that ilk—and Alys."

"Alys! Oh, Hugh, take me to her! Alys in England—and I did not know it!"

"I had just a few words with her. They have only lately arrived. This is her first appearance. Yes, let me take you to her. I think I can find them again."

"Tell me how she looks, Hugh," said Mercy, as they threaded their way through the crowded room—"little Alys!"

"That's what I want you to tell me, Mercy," he answered.

"I don't know what to say. Beautiful exceedingly—she could scarcely help that. But so ethereal—as though a

264 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

breath would blow her away. And with her eyes so large and bright, so full of a look—well, you will see for yourself. There she is! You can see Dare's head above the rest yonder by that curtain. Alys is beside him. Now you can see."

A sound of music in the distance had made a diversion. A number of people were flocking in the direction of the room, where a splendid string quartet was to be rendered by some of the first artists of the day. The motion of the crowd made an open space between herself and those two upon whom her attention was concentrated; and Mercy found herself gazing upon Alys Dare, almost as though she looked upon her for the first time.

Exquisitely robed, in floating draperies which Paris alone could have designed and executed, she seemed to shimmer and palpitate with radiant light, like the glitter of sunshine upon snow. She looked taller than of old, and even more slender and willowy, and the soft waving dark hair, piled with wonderful elaboration and effect upon the small head, with its delicate, vivid face all alight with eager excitement, gave the finishing touch to the picture, which was sufficiently attractive and arresting.

But was it Alys? That was the question which leaped to Mercy's lips. What was this change that had come over the face, making the familiar features like those of some stranger? It was Alys—yet not Alys: not until the big dark eyes lighted upon Mercy and her companion, and suddenly there was a quiver, a movement, a breaking up, as it were, of some indefinable mask—and behold in a moment it was the Alys of the past who stepped forward to meet her with outstretched hands and quivering lips.

"Oh, Mercy! Oh, Mercy!" And no other words followed, for the lips had begun to quiver, and they folded fast one over the other, whilst sideways—in the direction of the tall dark-browed husband, engrossed in conversation with a couple of men—she shot one glance, the meaning of which Mercy could not read; yet it seemed to her—and her soul was stirred within her at the sight—as though it were a glance of mute and deadly fear.

"Dearest Alys," said Mercy, taking possession of both

the small gloved hands, which shook and quivered in her clasp. "I am so glad to see you again! You did not write to tell me you were coming!"

"But I knew that I should see you! I have been counting the days. I saw in the papers that you were in town, Mercy. I would have written from Paris, only, only"—another of those fleeting sideways glances that went to Mercy's heart, followed by a little laugh that made her want to weep—"I have almost forgotten how to write now!"

Mercy's eyes, with that expression of sweet, questioning sympathy shining in them which Alys remembered so well, were fixed upon the quivering face, the mobile and delicate features of which seemed changing from moment to moment, as a pool over which the light is flickering.

"You know how it is when one is very, very—happy"—the last word came out in a little gasp, and with a sound which might have been either laugh or sob—"you seem to have time for nothing else. The old life recedes like a dream. And in that beautiful sunny land of *dolce far niente* . . . Oh, Mercy, you understand . . . you have not thought I have—forgotten!"

"No, dear Alys, I have not thought that."

"Ah, I knew that you would understand—that you would not forget me. I have thought of you every day, Mercy, every single day. But you know how it is—when one is very happy . . ."

The voice broke there once more, in that sound which was more like sob than the light laugh it purported to be, and the next moment Mercy saw the little start and flutter, and the turn towards the husband, as Captain Dare, suddenly aware that his wife had found friends, made a step forward and favoured Mercy with a bow and a handclasp, both of which seemed to her to savour slightly of some mood ironically sardonic.

"This is a surprise," she said. "We had none of us heard that you were coming over."

"So young Colin is back, is he?" said Captain Dare, turning the talk from his own movements. "And he wants the House of Dare, does he? Well he will not get it!"

266 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"He would like to rent it if you are not using it yourself," Mercy answered, looking with calm fearlessness into the dark face of the man from whom she had last parted after that stormy scene in the woodlands of Quentin Easter. She felt that his mood was stormy now, that the sight of her had moved him to some spasm of anger or of derision or of rage. "But perhaps you are coming back to live there yourself."

"The Dares never live anywhere—not those who are worthy of their name. I am coming back—at my own will and pleasure—and at my own will and pleasure I shall leave again when the moment comes." Then, with a soft inflection in his voice, which somehow made Mercy's flesh creep, he added, turning towards Alys: "My little wife must make acquaintance with her English home. We have been bride and bridegroom for a whole delightful winter's honeymoon. Now I must show my bride to English society, and then we will finish our honeymoon in the grimmer solitudes of Dare. That is what you want, my love, is it not?"

Alys swept him one of her swift upward glances, and answered:

"Yes, Rolfe, that is what I want."

"And I want Alys to spend a day with me—the first she has at liberty," said Mercy. "We have so much to hear and to tell mutually. Alys, are you very full of engagements? What day could you spare?"

She looked at her husband. It seemed as though she dared not attempt a reply without him. He appeared to debate a few minutes, and then, with a twist of the lips which might be meant for a smile, suggested the next Sunday.

"I am always free upon Sunday," said Mercy. "I should love to have Alys spend the day with me."

The big dark eyes were shining with a wistful pleasure as the friends parted. And Mercy said to Hugh as they made their way to the supper-room:

"Until I get Alys away from that husband of hers, I shall never know how it is with her, nor whether her life is happy—or tragic."

CHAPTER XLIII

THE WIFE OF DARE

BUT Alys did not come upon the appointed Sunday. Instead came a little note brought by a servant of the hotel, saying that she was in bed with a headache, and must be excused.

Somehow Mercy felt as though she had expected this. She sent several little notes of invitation to Alys; but never was the latter able to accept. Once again Dare brought his wife to dinner, and for a few minutes when they were together in the drawing-room Mercy had Alys to herself. But it was not an occasion for confidences. Alys was full of seemingly eager chatter about the doings of the day. She professed herself delighted with the gay round of the season. She had lovely dresses; her husband took her everywhere. Race meetings seemed to be his chief pleasure, and Alys talked quite merrily of the favourites and what was said about them, making out that she was growing quite learned in the lore of the turf. Her husband had also bought a high-power motor car, and he drove her all over the country to show her places of interest within a large radius of town. Rapid exercise, constant motion, perpetual change and excitement seemed to satisfy the present mood of Rolfe Dare.

"You see, in Sicily we lived such a soft, sweet, lotus-eating life," Alys said, whilst into her eyes there crept a look which Mercy was quite unable to interpret. "And now we like the excitement of constant change. Sometimes it is just a little bewildering. But it is very splendid too. And when we are tired of it all, then he will take me to the House of Dare. Oh, Mercy, that is what I am looking forward to! To be at home in England—and near to you!"

268 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

It was very sweetly said ; but into the voice of Alys there had crept a note which was, as it were, the corollary of the unreadable expression in the big dark eyes. Mercy simply longed to fold the quivering frame in her arms, and whisper in her ear that at Quentin Easter she would always find an asylum of refuge, safety and peace. But no such words passed her lips. Alys was married. With open eyes she had made her choice. She had vowed herself to the man who held her in the hollow of his hand. There was no evidence that this power had been abused. Only some deep-down, instinctive conviction in Mercy's heart told her that Alys lived in terror of her husband. None knew better than Mercy what hurt might be done—what consequences follow upon an ill-judged act—the betrayal of a suspicion for which she could allege no grounds. If she was to befriend Alys, she must walk very warily. Captain Dare would most certainly discover if anything ever passed between them of the nature of pact or alliance. Alys would be able to hold nothing back ; and once he believed that Mercy intended to take his wife's part against himself—then farewell to any chance of doing this ! That home in the wild, beautiful southern island would swallow her up again ; and who could say when any of them would see Alys more ?

And so the weeks of the season ran on. Alys and Mercy met with fair frequency ; but never alone ; never in such a way as to promote long or confidential talks. Mercy heard a little of that Sicilian home—the big place of marble steps and patios, of terraced gardens and scents and wonders of colour which Alys showed some skill in describing. But of the inner life within those big halls she knew nothing. The veil was kept ever closely drawn. Sometimes Mercy doubted whether, even if circumstances should later on throw them together under more favourable circumstances for the exchange of confidences, Alys would ever open her lips with regard to the tragedy of her own life.

"For it is tragedy—of that I am sure." It was Hugh who voiced the thought which Mercy vainly strove to combat.

Hugh was seeing more of the Dares than Mercy was. It seemed as though Captain Dare had taken a fancy to him.

Hugh dined with them rather frequently at their hotel. He was by way of getting theatre and opera boxes lent him, and he frequently took Alys and her husband to see the leading players and musical stars.

Alys and he had always been friends. Always he had felt towards her something of protective care and chivalrous devotion. At this time she was possessed of more powers of attraction than ever before. Something of mystery encompassed her. She was as a thing apart from the other women in the gay throng amongst which she moved. She did the same things, she wore the same aspect—only with a distinction that attracted no small attention and admiration—but she herself was not of this world though she was in it.

"I can't tell you what it is ; but there is tragedy somewhere. She dare not move hand or foot, make an engagement or write a letter without her husband's sanction. A single look from him will put a curb upon her speech, if ever her natural girlish impulse towards confidence or mirth begins to show itself. Sometimes I feel a kind of fierce longing to 'go for' Dare—as a schoolboy might go for some brutal bully of smaller boys. I can't give you any reason for what I am going to say ; but I believe that that man makes life for his wife a simple hell upon earth."

Mercy went back to Quentin Easter at the end of June, very glad to be once more at home ; yet a little heavy of heart on account of Alys, whom she left behind, in the feverish whirl of the great world of fashion, not knowing when she would see her again.

It seemed that Captain Dare had many plans and projects. They would stay in town till after Goodwood, and then a motor tour up to the Highlands would absorb some weeks. There would be grouse-shooting through the best of that season, and perhaps deer-stalking later ; but with the autumn they intended to put in a visit to the House of Dare, and Alys always ended by the asseveration that that is what she was really looking forward to.

But Mercy grieved that summer would not bring them to his family place. Summer was the time for that grim stone

270 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

house and tangled, neglected garden. With the southing winds and driving rains of autumn; with its shortening days and long nights, the House of Dare would be but a dismal place for a bride to come to. And how much less easy would communication then be betwixt that place and Quentin Easter! Some uneasy conviction that Captain Dare himself had thought of all this forced itself home upon Mercy. Yet what could she do? What could anyone do?

Mercy's summer was—apart from her anxious fears for Alys, who never wrote to tell of her movements or doings—a singularly happy one.

There was Joyce at Hallows Easter, in all the glamour and rapture of her first real home since the home of her childhood had been broken up. There was the Rectory, with a lady now at its head—a woman whose heart overflowed with happiness in the possession of a husband whom she loved with all her heart, and the son, given back, as it were, from the very grave. For the silence which had enshrouded the life of Colin Dare, as far as his mother was concerned, had been as deep and impenetrable as that of death itself.

Just now Colin was at the House of Dare. He had been up to London to meet that kinsman towards whom his feelings had always been singularly mixed; and he had wrung from him a half-reluctant, half-scornful permission to do what he could to make of the old house a somewhat more worthy home to which to bring home his young wife.

Colin asked for no money for this. It was enough for him that he gained this much from his ungracious kinsman. But he and Mercy laid many charming plans together concerning the things they might venture to do, bearing always in mind that it would not benefit Alys if they overstepped the limits of prudence, or devised transformations upon a too elaborate or drastic scale.

But it is common knowledge that much can be done simply with soap and water, with whitewash and paint. And in a very old family house—even though it has been despoiled of the wealth of its original plenishings—there are always treasures of sorts which can be unearthed in dusty garrets,

or things stowed away as broken and useless which a little care and skill will restore in wonderful fashion.

Then the old gardens responded quickly to the labours of a staff of men, working under Colin's eyes, and directed by hints and suggestions from Mercy, Joyce or Lilius.

All the neighbourhood took interest and pleasure in this work going on here, and the House of Dare was a centre for many pleasant gatherings, where Colin played host, and to which people came with little gifts to be placed in that room with a pleasant oriel window to the west, that had been chosen by Mercy for Alys's special sanctum.

"Our wedding presents," Joyce dubbed these; and certainly Alys had so arranged her life that no presents had been possible for her before her marriage.

So here was, as it were, an oasis in the desert, a place of dainty softness, with loving touches everywhere, all telling of the goodwill and affection of her friends, set in the grim austerity of that dark and silent house, the characteristic aspect of which, though softened somewhat, had not been materially changed.

To Colin and Mercy these days were very happy ones. She often rode over, or drove with some guest—a member of the family interested alike in Colin and in the work going on. They would wander together through house and garden, exchanging reminiscences, gathering up scattered threads, forging new links, and knitting up the fabrics of a friendship which was to both a source of calm and very perfect pleasure.

The others watched them, wondering, and sometimes smiling. Colin and Mercy knew; and smiled themselves—together. Something in the unique quality of this friendship rendered its charm the more penetrating and fragrant. It was something at once so intimate and so inherently satisfactory that it made for a content in life which neither had known in such full measure before.

"No one in all the world has ever been quite like you, Mercy," Colin would sometimes say to her. That was one of the qualities she possessed for him, that he could say just whatever thought came into his heart. And her

272 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

answer gravely given, with the deep-down gleam in the eyes that he knew so well, showed that she understood the thing which he sought to say.

"And no one understands that but just you, Colin; and that is why no one else will quite understand what our friendship means."

But there was one rather heavy heart amongst those guests who came and went in the House of Dare during these golden summer days; and that was the heart of Colin's mother.

Sometimes with her arm linked in his, or laid across his shoulders, she would speak of the anxious fears which clutched her heart.

"Colin, I am fearful for that poor child—little timid Alys, as we used to call her—mated with that terrible man! Do I not know something of his nature—cruel, lustful, menacing! He married her out of bravado. We all knew that he was courting Mercy. He made no secret of that. She has not breathed a word; but that was the cause of his rash marriage. When he is weary of his toy, when marriage has palled upon him—what then? She will not hold him—she has never held him! It is he who has her fast in a net; and will watch her struggles—her anguish—her terror . . ."

"Don't, mother! You are hurting yourself!"

Lilias put her hands before her eyes and quivered from head to foot.

"Oh, that poor child—that poor little victim!"

CHAPTER XLIV

MERCY ENTERTAINS

It was rather a poignant moment. All the rest of Mercy's guests were there. Only Captain and Mrs Dare were still to come before the announcement of dinner.

Colonel Quentin and his young wife had arrived, Joyce wearing her bridal whiteness with an assumption of matronly stateliness which was mightily becoming to her.

Mr Earle and his wife were of the company, Lilius looking very beautiful, yet a little pale and nervous. For this was to be her first encounter with the man who had wrecked the happiness of her early wedded life, and thrown such a black shadow athwart the long weary years which had followed, severing her from her only child, and making bitter the lot she had to live.

And yet it had been decreed that they should meet—and that the wrongs and sorrows and humiliations, now a quarter of a century old, should be buried in oblivion. The Rector, whose Christian calling strove with the militant impulses of a strong character, had discussed this matter in all its bearings both with his wife and with the young mistress of Quentin Easter, and at this conclusion had they arrived. Old wrongs were to be forgiven; for the wounds inflicted had healed. Lilius was happy as she had never been in her life before. Her son was restored to her. The long-drawn sorrows of the past lay like a dream behind her. The man who had wronged her might conceivably have repented. At least the wrong lay very far away now. He had married one whom all desired to befriend. For the sake of Alys, if for no other reason, it would be well to let the dead past bury its dead.

Colin, whose hot blood had revolted at first from ever

274 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

reconciling himself with his kinsman again, had gradually been won over by Lilius and Mercy, and already the meeting between that pair had taken place. In discussion as to the partial restoration of the House of Dare as a place which could be lived in again, the two men had found a common interest. Colin had not succeeded in his wish to lease the house for his own use ; but it was possible that he might win some concessions as to the cultivation or enclosing of the land, and the establishment of a stud farm for horses there. At least the two men had not quarrelled when they met, and, though friendship might be impracticable between them, a mutual tolerance was for the moment established.

Colin, of course, was of the party to-night ; so also was Miss Marjoribanks, whose genial presence was always an asset when any situation critical or embarrassing was likely to arise. Hugh Leigh was a guest at Quentin Easter at this moment, having run over for a few days' shooting, as he often did through the autumn.

This completed the table ; for Lady Sarah had elected of late not to dine in the banqueting-hall when there was company. She was somewhat frail and infirm, and easily fatigued by excitement or sustained conversation. Colonel Quentin played host to Mercy's hostess upon occasions such as these ; the old lady remaining in her chair beside the hearth, but avoiding the fatigues of the dinner-table.

" Captain and Mrs Dare."

All eyes were turned towards the door as these appeared. They had been a week at home ; but Mercy had not yet set eyes upon Alys. She was out when Mercy paid an early call. Mercy was riding over the estate with Colin when the return call was made. This was their first meeting—the first time Alys's foot had crossed the threshold of Quentin Easter since her flight to make that hasty marriage ; and it seemed as though she suffered an access of nervous agitation as she entered the room, which she strove with a pathetic courage to overcome.

Beautiful exceedingly—but, oh ! how frail of aspect. There was a look upon the etherealised face, an expression in the big pathetic eyes, which went straight to Mercy's

heart. It was not exactly appeal, nor fear, nor misery—yet it seemed a blend of all the three, with an admixture of many more subtle emotions which defied all attempt at analysis. "Tragic" was the word that rose to Mercy's lips, as hers met the trembling ones of Alys. Yet the young wife, exquisitely dressed, smiling and vivid, showed no indication of aught amiss.

"Are we late? Please forgive us. We have been motoring all day, and had a little breakdown." She turned to Lady Sarah and, bending over her with a wonderful grace and sweetness, made many inquiries concerning her health and well-being. And before these had been answered the announcement of dinner checked other introductions or greetings, and upon the arm of Colonel Quentin Alys was led across the well-remembered baronial-like hall, and into that vaulted place of panelling and pictures reserved for the statelier functions of Quentin Easter.

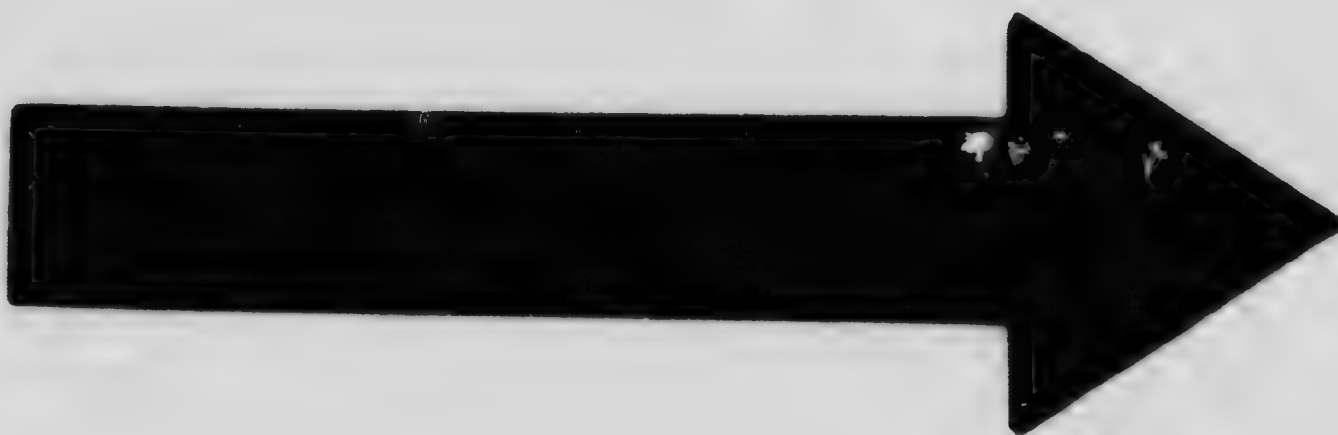
Captain Dare and Mercy brought up the rear of the short procession; and Mercy was perfectly serene and self-possessed, albeit she knew something of the meaning of the fiery glance with which the man offered her his arm, and gauged some of the tumult of thought and memory which obsessed him at this moment.

But if he was thinking of that interview in the wood, she turned her mind resolutely away, and, with the gracious dignity which so well became her as the mistress of Quentin Easter, she asked him of his Sicilian life, and how Alys spent her time in the sunny south; also how long they would brave the shortening days and the rigours of the English winter, albeit in the soft West Country these were less to be dreaded than in the bleak north.

He answered, but without greatly enlightening her. Of his future plans he spoke little. The Dares were creatures of mood, he told her. At the moment it was his whim to live at Dare; but so soon as he wearied of the grim old house . . .

"But what does Alys say to it? Has she no voice in the matter?"

Mercy spoke easily, and with that kindling smile in her



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



1.45

1.50

1.56

1.63

1.71

1.80

1.88

1.96

2.00

2.05

2.10

2.15

2.20

2.25

2.30

2.35

2.40

2.45

2.50

2.55

2.60

2.65

2.70

2.75

2.80

2.85

2.90

2.95

3.00

3.05

3.10

3.15

3.20

3.25

3.30

3.35

3.40

3.45

3.50

3.55

3.60

3.65

3.70

3.75

3.80

3.85

3.90

3.95

4.00

4.05

4.10

4.15

4.20

4.25

4.30

4.35

4.40

4.45

4.50

4.55

4.60

4.65

4.70

4.75

4.80

4.85

4.90

4.95

5.00

5.05

5.10

5.15

5.20

5.25

5.30

5.35

5.40

5.45

5.50

5.55

5.60

5.65

5.70

5.75

5.80

5.85

5.90

5.95

6.00

6.05

6.10

6.15

6.20

6.25

6.30

6.35

6.40

6.45

6.50

6.55

6.60

6.65

6.70

6.75

6.80

6.85

6.90

6.95

7.00

7.05

7.10

7.15

7.20

7.25

7.30

7.35

7.40

7.45

7.50

7.55

7.60

7.65

7.70

7.75

7.80

7.85

7.90

7.95

8.00

8.05

8.10

8.15

8.20

8.25

8.30

8.35

8.40

8.45

8.50

8.55

8.60

8.65

8.70

8.75

8.80

8.85

8.90

8.95

9.00

9.05

9.10

9.15

9.20

9.25

9.30

9.35

9.40

9.45

9.50

9.55

9.60

9.65

9.70

9.75

9.80

9.85

9.90

9.95

10.00

10.05

10.10

10.15

10.20

10.25

10.30

10.35

10.40

10.45

10.50

10.55

10.60

10.65

10.70

10.75

10.80

10.85

10.90

10.95

11.00

11.05

11.10

11.15

11.20

11.25

11.30

11.35

11.40

11.45

11.50

11.55

11.60

11.65

11.70

11.75

11.80

11.85

11.90

11.95

12.00

12.05

12.10

12.15

12.20

12.25

12.30

12.35

12.40

12.45

12.50

12.55

12.60

12.65

12.70

12.75

12.80

12.85

12.90

12.95

13.00

13.05

13.10

13.15

13.20

13.25

13.30

13.35

13.40

13.45

13.50

13.55

13.60

13.65

13.70

13.75

13.80

13.85

13.90

13.95

14.00

14.05

14.10

14.15

14.20

14.25

14.30

14.35

14.40

14.45

14.50

14.55

14.60

14.65

14.70

14.75

14.80

14.85

14.90

14.95

15.00

15.05

15.10

15.15

15.20

15.25

15.30

15.35

15.40

15.45

15.50

15.55

15.60

15.65

15.70

15.75

15.80

15.85

15.90

15.95

16.00

16.05

16.10

16.15

16.20

16.25

16.30

16.35

16.40

16.45

16.50

16.55

16.60

16.65

16.70

16.75

16.80

16.85

16.90

eyes which had the power to thrill many hearts. Captain Dare was looking straight into her eyes ; perhaps he thrilled a little also, for a change passed across his features the meaning of which she was unable to read. He spoke shortly, almost sternly :

" Alys has no will but mine."

Mercy looked at him full with a grave considering glance which seemed to revolve many matters, passing them in review. The man spoke on with a certain haste, as though to cover the impression his words might have made.

" I suppose it is you whom Alys has to thank for that dainty lady's bower—so alien to the atmosphere of the House of Dare. She will thank you for it all in her own words. Somebody must have helped young Colin in the transformation of the place."

" Scarcely transformation. But he hoped to make it just habitable—for a bride to come to as her English home."

" It was better as it was before."

" Not for Alys," insisted Mercy.

" Oh—Alys ! "

That was all ; the tone in which he spoke the words, half slighting, half mocking and with a ring of unmistakable contempt, if not of aversion, rang like a death-knell through Mercy's brain. What did it all mean ? She kept intercepting dark suspicious glances darted at his wife where she sat between Colonel Quentin and Hugh Leigh. And when he was not looking at Alys, it seemed to Mercy as though the sombre eyes dwelt upon the face of Lilius Earle with an expression which she was unable to fathom. There had not been opportunity for the reintroduction before they filed in to dinner, for which Mercy had been glad. The ice being now broken it would be easier to accomplish this in the drawing-room later on.

Once Captain Dare caught Mercy's quiet gaze, and he spoke :

" I am looking at Mrs Earle," he remarked, with a slightly sardonic air. " She was Lilius Dare when I saw her last."

" Yes, I am aware of that."

" And no doubt you have heard—her story. That is

quite immaterial to me. But you will possibly understand that under the circumstances of the case, I shall not permit anything but the most casual acquaintanceship between her and—my wife."

Mercy made no response. Self-control had been instilled into her from her early childhood. This man was her guest. However atrocious the taste of his remarks or innuendoes, nothing could change that fact. Since she could not answer him as he merited, she would say nothing at all.

As early as possible she gave the signal for the move, and the ladies passed out together. Mercy saw that, as the door of the dining-hall closed behind them, Alys slipped her hand within the arm of Lilius Earle, and that Lilius seemed to press that hand to her side in a gesture of tenderness and protective love.

Back to the drawing-room, where Lady Sarah was awaiting them, refreshed by her hour of rest, those two passed into a little curtained recess together, and Mercy, claimed by Joyce and Miss Marjoribanks, made no attempt to interrupt the colloquy. Indeed, she felt no call to do so. As Mrs Dale, Lilius had known Alys before she had done so; and she had known Rolfe Dare almost before the girl was born. If circumstances brought the two together—let it be so. It might be that this would prove advantageous for Alys—at least, who could say?

But before the men joined them Alys had come forth, and was seated beside Lady Sarah when her husband advanced up the room with his dark gaze fixed full upon her. Mercy caught the flicker which passed over her delicately hollowed features, and the bright flush, almost hectic in its transparency, which rose in her cheek as she met that searching glance. After that it was easy to note that she spoke with a feverish gaiety, that her laugh rang out as though to order upon the smallest excuse. She sang when asked, and her voice was very clear and sweet, but there was some haunting cadence of sadness audible which was singularly touching, and Mercy felt the smart of tears in her eyes as she listened. And scarcely had the last notes died away before Captain

278 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

Dare, rising abruptly, declared that they must be getting home.

"Alys has been out all day. She is looking over-done. I must take care of her in this more unkindly clime. She is used to the soft airs of Sicily."

Mercy herself wrapped the rich cloak closely about the slender frame, and held Alys for a moment in her arms.

"Will you like to go back to Sicily?" she asked half tenderly, half playfully.

She felt the unmistakable shudder which ran all through the girl's frame; but Dare was standing by and the answer came with a gay lightness accompanied with the ready laugh:

"Of course I shall—when Rolfe is ready. It is a lovely place, a lovely climate, a lovely life!"

The last word broke into that little gasping sound that might either be laugh or sob, which Mercy had heard many times before this.

Then Alys was almost borne away to the motor by her husband, and Mercy went slowly back to her other guests.

Lilias was standing near to the door, her face intensely grave and compassionate. Their eyes met.

"He is killing her—by inches," spoke Lilias, in a low mournful tone. And Mercy felt by a terrible illumination of the senses that this was indeed the truth.

getting

r-done.
She is

ut the
s.
ed half

through
answer
ready

lovely

d that
many

by her
ests.
tensely

a low
ination

CHAPTER XLV

"FOUND DROWNED!"

It was a dim afternoon late in November. Mercy was sipping her tea by the light of a great piled-up fire of logs, and on the other side of the hearth sat Colin, wearing his hunting pink—a goodly figure of a man, though much splashed about the legs from hard riding over soft country. Indeed he would not have been in Mercy's drawing-room at all in such guise had she not encountered him at her own gates, as she drove home after a round of cottage visitations, and persuaded him to come in.

Lady Sarah was keeping her own room to-day, as in dull and chilly weather she often did. But it was no unusual thing for Colin to drop in for a chat with Mercy, and there was always plenty to discuss both of personal and impersonal matters; for the friendship between the pair, begun in early childhood, had ripened into a very perfect and gracious life, which held its element of joy and serene contentment for them both.

At this moment their faces were unwontedly grave; for they were discussing a theme which was fraught with anxiety for them both.

"Yes, he was there," Colin was saying, "as well mounted as any man in the field. He must be spending money like water—first that great car, now some of the finest hunters in the county. She drove to the meet, but he saw her start on her homeward way before the hounds threw off. He kept guard over the carriage all the time she was there. She wore splendid furs and looked lovely. The men crowded about her as they always do. But she drove off soon; and would be at home quite early . . ."

"She was not at home this afternoon; for I went to see

her, hoping to find her alone. I knew he was likely to be out with the hounds. But she could not be found anywhere. I had to come away."

"I suppose she has her orders," said Colin, with something of the grim "Dare" look upon his handsome face. "Nobody ever does see her alone, as far as I can make out. My mother tries . . . but it is quite hopeless."

Their faces expressed gravity, concern and an anxious compassion. Colin's strong hand clenched itself upon the arm of his chair till the knuckles showed white. The faint grey faded out from the lowering sky, and only the red glow of the fire played upon the two faces.

Suddenly the door was flung open wide, and a towering figure loomed up in the aperture, closely followed by the somewhat scandalised butler. A deep voice rang through the room like the note of a bugle :

"Where is Alys ?"

Captain Dare made three forward strides, as though he came to swoop down upon some cowering victim—and carry her off by main force. The firelight showed a dusky face flushed by exertion, excitement and anger, and eyes which glowed in a fashion not pleasant to see. Colin instinctively sprang up and placed himself close to Mercy.

She spoke with quiet self-possession and dignity :

"Alys is not here, Captain Dare. I wish she were."

"You came to fetch her—you cannot deny it. I know your purpose. You came to steal my wife away from me !"

His excitement was something phenomenal. The whole man was obsessed in an extraordinary fashion. They both felt it, and Mercy experienced a sense of quick relief that at this moment she was not alone, but had Colin beside her. At the same time she desired no collision between the two men, and her touch upon Colin's arm held him silent ; though he stood tense and alert, just as did the great hound, who had reared himself up from his mat in the shadows upon the entrance of the unexpected guest.

"I came to try and see Alys ; but I had to go away with-

out doing so. They looked for her, but could not find her anywhere."

"So they told me, and I told them they lied. You have taken my wife away—I have come to claim her."

Mercy rose to her full height, which for a woman was sufficiently stately. Unflinchingly she looked Rolfe Dare full in the eyes. In her voice was some inflection of that perfect truthfulness which was one of her salient qualities :

"You have come to the wrong place then, Captain Dare. If your wife has fled from you, she has not come here. But let me tell you one thing, which is this—that if she had—if she had come to me and claimed my protection, I would have given it her in full measure. I would not have given her up to you against her own will. I would have made this house her place of sanctuary, and you should not have taken her away !"

"Until the law of the land compelled you, madam."

She smiled with that touch of haughty scorn that so well became the handsome, high-bred face.

"Exactly : until the law of the land compelled me."

And Colin spoke the next words :

"The law of the land gives protection to helpless wives from persecuting husbands. If Alys does not know that—you do."

The deep breathing of the two men could be heard through that silent room. But Mercy stood between them. Her presence was the guarantee of an armed truce.

"Then you refuse to give Alys up ?"

"I do not need to refuse, because she is not here."

"You know where she is ?"

"I do not."

"Will you swear it ?"

"No."

"Ah !—you dare not ! You know where she has gone !"

Again Colin's voice took up the word :

"It is only needful for those to swear whose word is not their bond."

With something of a snarling sound Dare turned upon his kinsman. There was that look in his eyes before which,

282 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

as a child, Colin had many a time shrunk in fear ; but he did not shrink now.

" By what right do you take upon yourself to interpose in this matter ? No one spoke to you."

" I speak as Miss Quentin's friend," answered Colin, " to a man who forgets himself in her presence."

" Insolent young puppy ! I shall know how to deal with you when the time comes ! "

Mercy's hand was on the bell. She pulled it sharply.

" Kindly remember, Captain Dare, that you are speaking in my house to my friend." Then, as the butler appeared in the doorway, she added very quietly :

" Show Captain Dare out."

He turned and went, blackness on his brow, black rage in his heart. Mercy and Colin left together in the firelit room looked one at the other anxiously.

" What has happened, Colin ; what can have happened ? "

" Alys has run away. That is better than staying. My mother was right in what she said—he is killing her ! "

" But where is she ? Why did she not come here ? She might have known . . . "

" I will go and see what I can find out. If she be really missing the news will be over the place like wildfire. They will have to warn the police. Rolfe will let no stone unturned to get her back. Oh, I know him ! I will not let his victim go. God help her if she get . . . clutches again ! "

Mercy's face slightly paled at the tone in which those words were spoken. She herself could not remain indoors. She donned cap and coat and went forth with Colin, her own destination being the Little Old House where Miss Marjoribanks lived.

But Alys had not been seen there, nor at Hallows Easter, where Joyce might have been entertaining her. The Rector was anxiously scouring the village for news of the wanderer, and by eight o'clock search parties had been organised, and the whole district was aroused and in eager pursuit after traces of the fugitive.

Next day a wire from Mercy brought down Hugh Leigh,

who in his legal capacity had not infrequently solved difficult problems before this. But he, too, was non-plussed, though extremely anxious and moved.

For Alys had always exercised a great charm over him. Had it not been for her sudden infatuation, and that rash marriage which had so tragically ended, he knew that he might have made her his own wife. His dream of Mercy was finally shattered. He had come to know that she was not for him—even to acquiesce in her ruling in this matter. But Alys . . .

"It is terrible to think of—that poor little tender, timid creature, probably without money or clothing—for she seems to have left everything behind her there. . . ."

"Yes; she did not even go away in any of her rich dresses, but in things which she used to wear when she stayed here before her marriage. I sent the boxes she left here to the House of Dare before she came. The maid says that sometimes her mistress wore some of these things about the garden; though her husband always wished her to be sumptuously dressed. But she must have gone away in her own clothes, for nothing else is missing. And she never had money of her own. The maid is positive about that. . . ."

"I thought she had a small legacy or annuity or something."

"She had; but what has happened about her property since her marriage no one can tell. We have no lawyer's address to write to. Captain Dare will tell nothing. It is his affair, he says, and his only. Colin has done what he can; but it has only provoked ill blood. And not a trace can be found of Alys. . . ."

"She has perhaps lost herself in cruel London—poor little child, poor little child!"

"I do not think she could have got there unobserved. She had not money for a railway ticket, and the roads have been watched. They are being watched still. She might have a few trinkets of her own to dispose of; but we should have heard by now of that, I should think. Captain Dare has detectives down. He is doing everything he can. Now

284 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

they have begun to drag the river and the smaller streams. . . ."

"Good Lord . . . has it come to that?"

They looked at each other steadily, mournfully.

"It is those very timid creatures who are often at the last driven to the most desperate acts. And the life she led was enough to turn her brain. Ah, poor little Alys!"

Just one week after Alys had disappeared the dreadful whisper went round the place:

"Found drowned!"

In the still depths of a wild mountain tarn, up in the grim moorland heights above the House of Dare, the body was found. An almost precipitous fall of boulder-strewn rock bounded the tarn on one side, and down this rugged and terrible slide the hapless woman must have fallen, dashing herself almost to pieces before she touched the kindly water. The face was unrecognisable, and the swollen limbs had turned black and ghastly. But the clothing was unmistakable. It was that which had belonged to the Alys who had made for a while a home at Quentin Easter. Mercy was able to identify the dress. The under things showed the marks of her maiden name. The tragedy of life was ended for one more victim of life's over-hard battle.

The coroner's jury voiced in their verdict that word which had been passing from mouth to mouth:

"Found drowned."

CHAPTER XLVI

THE VICTIM OF DARE

It was a scene of poignant pathos—that simple funeral in the little moorland burying-ground where Captain Dare had decreed that the hapless woman should lie.

The House of Dare lay without the limits of the parish of Quentin Easter. A little lonely church, sparsely attended, set far away upon the moors, and served only on Sundays from the nearest town, had been the nominal place of worship for the inhabitants of that grim and lonely house, though it was freely said that, living or dead, the Dares had little to do with the church.

Rovers and men of adventure, their bones lay scattered over the world ; and though a few headstones bore the name of Dare, these belonged chiefly to the wives or daughter who had been left at home in loneliness and sorrow, often knowing little as to the lives of those whose name they bore.

The simple, solemn service was ended. The spectators, drawn to the spot by curiosity or sympathy with the poor lady whose young life had been cut so tragically short, had melted away. Mercy had thrown into the open grave a loosely tied handful of white and scented blossoms, turning away with tears in her eyes, to be led by Joyce and Miss Marjoribanks to the carriage waiting upon the road below.

Rolfe Dare stood, like a figure carved in bronze, near to the head of the grave so soon to be filled in, when Hugh Leigh stepped up to his side.

"You are as much the murderer of that hapless girl, who lies there, as though you had struck her down to her death with your iron fist. You have crushed the life out of her inch by inch ; till at the last her reason gave way, and she sought the tender mercies of death sooner than that death

in life which you made her suffer. As God is Judge of quick and dead, may you be made to answer for this evil work of yours before His throne in heaven ! ”

Mercy heard each clearly-enunciated word, spoken in a voice which carried far through the frosty air, albeit the tones were low. She turned her head to look back. At that moment she saw Captain Dare's clenched fist shoot forth, and but for Colin's quick spring to his side her cousin would have measured his length upon the turf—have tottered perhaps into that open grave.

The moment he had struck, Dare turned upon his heel, not so much as looking to see the effect of his blow.

“ You know where to find me when you want me,” he said, without turning his head as he spoke.

Hugh made no response ; the breath was for the moment knocked out of him by that utterly unexpected blow. But Colin's voice rang clear and stern :

“ We shall know where to find you when you are wanted.”

Mercy and Joyce drove back almost in silence. Colonel Quentin had, after seeing the ladies to their carriage, gone back to join the men of the party ; and Miss Marjoribanks, after a few words of comment upon the occurrences of the afternoon, lapsed also into silence. All felt by an unexpressed instinct that they were on the brink of some new tragedy. None could have said why ; but something in the tones, the faces, the actions of the men upon the brink of that lonely, moorland grave seemed charged with a significance which would have its outcome later.

Mercy felt herself trembling a little as she heard in retrospect the thud of that heavy blow, and the vibrating tones of angry men desperately at war with each other.

She was glad, when she reached the first lodge of Quentin Easter, to get out, sending her companions on to their respective homes, and herself to walk through the winding avenue, and so up to the house, where she entered by a side door, and went straight to her own private room.

Rather to her surprise, the room was not empty, though the fire blazed cheerily, and the tea equipage had been brought in to await her return. Mercy paused for a

moment at the door, and a name escaped her lips in accents of surprise :

" Liliass ! Ought you to be here ? "

For the Rector's wife had not been seen out of doors for nearly a week. She had a little cold, it was said, and had excused herself from her ordinary duties. Her face was pale, as Mercy saw, and there was something strained in her expression. All those who knew her past history could well understand how the tragedy of Alys Dare's death had affected her. It was the kind of happening which must needs recall to mind certain dark episodes of that past which she would fain forget.

Liliass came forward and closed the door. There was a subdued tremor of excitement and agitation about her of which Mercy was instantly conscious. Next moment they stood together upon the rug, gripping hands and looking into each other's eyes.

" Mercy, I have come to tell you a strange thing. Hush ! Are you sure that no one can hear us ? "

" Quite sure, Liliass." Mercy was now perfectly calm and mistress of herself. She felt as though standing upon the verge of something strange, mysterious—perhaps even terrible. Yet already a ray of blinding, inexplicable hope shot through her heart.

" I come to you, Mercy, with a message—from Alys ! "

" From Alys !—Ah ! "

" Alys is not dead. She has been desperately ill. I have gone through a terrible time. But she lives ; and she has sent me—to you."

" Alys ! Alys alive ! Where, Liliass ? "

" In the only place where I could hide her. In the old Malt-house of the Rectory."

Mercy knew that name for a strange and very ancient adjunct to the quaint and aged Rectory, which was always known to have been built up upon the foundations of some religious house. What this queer, old, useless adjunct had originally been no antiquarian had ever satisfactorily settled. Below was a huge bare barn-like space, only entered by a door in the back looking upon a copse

288 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

which grew almost up to the walls. Above were some rooms which had long fallen into disuse and disrepair. But at some time or another a forgotten rector with an overflowing family had converted them into bed-chambers for his boys, and some rickety old furniture still stood mouldering there, though the place was never entered from year's end to year's end.

There was a way of getting to these upper rooms, and that was through a door upon the first floor at the end of a little-used passage. Liliias had the key. She had found some interest in this quaint old adjunct, and had instituted sundry airings and cleanings of the desolate rooms. Also she had found them convenient for storing away certain plenishings of the house which she wished to replace by the presents they had received, and by a few belongings of her own that she had brought with her. Thus it came about that the place which went (no one knew why) by the name of the old Malt-house now boasted a couple of rooms quite respectably furnished, albeit there was no thought of using them.

And now—oh, how could it be believed?—and yet Mercy knew it to be true—Alys was hiding there. It was not Alys whom they had laid in that lonely grave amongst the headstones of the Dares!

"Liliias, sit down; you are shaking all over! Now tell me every single thing! Then I must go to Alys."

"Mercy, you remember that day—when she disappeared—the day of the hunt? That was the day when I was out and Arnold thought I took a chill. I have been kept shut up more or less ever since. That just suited me. I kept up in my room a good deal—with a good many invalid meals sent up—they must have thought my appetite suspicious! But then little Alys scarcely took enough to keep a bird alive!"

"Does not—Arnold—know?"

"No; even from him I have had to keep it a secret—till now. Listen, Mercy, listen! I was out that afternoon alone. I had to visit a lonely cottage away beyond Coombe Bottom. It was coming back that I saw a wandering figure

—and something familiar, yet so unspeakably forlorn in its aspect, drew me out of the path towards it. The girl was wandering waveringly in the direction of the cutting through which the railway runs. When I got up to her I saw that it was Alys—Alys looking as she used to do at Eyton Grange, in a simple girlish gown, and with that wild, timid look in her eyes that she came with after she had lost her father. She knew me, and held my hands fast; but her words were wild and terrible. ‘You were right—oh, you were very, very right. You ran away from him. That is what I am doing now. But he will find me; he will come after me. And I cannot bear it longer—I have tried—but I cannot! And I am so very, very weary. I shall go down there’—she pointed towards the cutting—‘and I shall lie down to sleep. Oh, I shall sleep—I know I shall. And perhaps God will be good, and not let the roar of the train awaken me. And it will be all over in a moment. And I shall be free. And when they find me and carry me home—I shall not be frightened any more.’”

“Ah, poor little Alys.” Mercy’s voice shook. “And with so many friends about her—to feel like that!”

Lilias made a gesture of mute comprehension.

“You do not know the power of that man’s strength upon the weakness of some women’s nature. I do. It was almost worse for her here amongst friends—like a man dying of thirst, and hearing the trickle of water he cannot reach. Help so near—and yet help she dared not take. . . . Oh, I understood!”

“And you saved her, Lilias!”

“With the greatest difficulty. For long I feared I could not do it. I shivered lest I should hear the roar of some approaching train, and that she would break from me and fly towards that on-coming death. . . . But I would not let her go. I held her by force. I talked and I talked—and I promised her everything she asked . . . promised to hold her secret inviolable—even from Arnold, even from you. It was the only way. I could not have saved her else. And the dusk was falling, and she was terribly weak when the wild mood passed, and I knew she was going to be

290 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

ill. But at last I got her home—through the plantation and into the Malt-house. I hid her there below, covering her with my cloak. And then I ran in, and I collected what I wanted. I lit a fire in one of those upper rooms. I got food prepared, and then I slipped down by that little mouldering stairway between the upper and lower floor; and I got her up and put her to bed. There she has lain ever since, wandering in delirium, or lying in a stupor. And always when she wakes up at my approach she says: 'You have not told?' And I can say that I have not; that nobody knows! That has saved her reason; though it has been hard, hard work for me—with all that has been passing!

"And now she has opened her eyes this very afternoon; and has understood that there is no hue and cry after her—because she was found drowned, and is being buried this very day.

"When she heard that she heaved a great sigh of content, and spoke just a few words: I should like to see Mercy now.'"

CHAPTER XLVII

AT HER MERCY

"MERCY, you will not betray her!"

Lilias spoke almost pleadingly, as they hurried together through the gathering dusk.

"You must trust me, Lilias," answered Mercy. "And Alys must trust me too."

"We do, we do. Mercy, I found it almost harder to keep it from you than from—Arnold. But I had passed my word. It was terrible to think that she might die there—on my hands—and that there might be another inquest over Alys Dare. . . ." Lilias lightly shuddered. "Mercy, who can that other woman have been?"

"I cannot guess. I did not see the body. My uncle would not have that. I helped only to identify some of the clothes. They were certainly Alys's—quite good still, except for the wetting. They said the face was all torn and . . . not recognisable; but the height, the colour of the hair—everything tallied. No one had any doubt."

"That has been her safety; after the first few days the hue and cry died down. I lived in terror of smoke being seen from one of the Malt-house chimneys. I used to get coke and anthracite from the outside stores, and keep the fire hot and red all day. There is a great ilex-tree growing right over the roof—that was a great help; and people have not half sharp eyes in these days. Children are not taught to observe, as Arnold says, and a generation without eyes has grown up! I was thankful to remember that! I was thankful that I looked pale and ill, and that I had a little cold about me. I played up to the part of semi-invalid. And it simplified things very much. But I knew it could not go on for ever. And every day I asked what

292 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

would come next. It was rather awful knowing that some poor creature was being buried to-day as Alys Dare. But what could I do? And Alys was more frightened of Arnold's knowing than anybody. Poor child! I understood what she meant. As a clergyman, he perhaps of all men could scarcely have kept silence."

Rapidly making their way towards the Rectory, they entered by the plantation on its far side, and crept cautiously towards the black bulk of the Malt-house, which loomed up against the grey sky.

Lilias had the key of the little door set inside the great folding ones, and just within was a lantern which she lighted. By its feeble illumination they traversed the great bare place to the corner, where a little twisted stairway led up to the floor above.

These rooms Mercy had visited somewhat recently, when helping Lilias to get her pretty quaint Rectory home arranged to her liking; and at one door they paused a moment, and then Lilias quietly turned the handle and entered, Mercy remaining for the moment outside.

But she saw a firelit interior; a room with rugs laid down upon a boarded floor, with old furniture, comfortable and good; a window closely shuttered and curtained, and the end of a bed, partially hidden by a torn Japanese screen.

A sound of weak or low murmured words came from behind the screen; and then Mercy heard her name spoken in accents of feeble urgency.

Without waiting for further summons, she came forward, and, with a mist of thankful tears rising in her eyes, she bent over the wasted form and hollow-eyed face which might have belonged to one just arisen from the grave.

Two thin white hands were extended towards her.

"Mercy, you warned me—but I would not listen. And now I cannot bear it any longer. They will not let me die; but you will take care of me! You will not give me up—to him."

Mercy took the two feverish hands and held them fast.

"I will take care of you, Alys. You need not be afraid. You are quite safe. I will not let you go."

It was one of Mercy's qualities to inspire absolute trust in those who knew her. Alys no longer asked agitated questions as to the how, the why, the when. Mercy had taken her under her protection. She was the Queen of Quentin Easter. Nothing else mattered. Mercy would keep her safe.

For almost half-an-hour she slumbered sweetly, holding Mercy's hand. When she opened her eyes again Liliias had food to give her. Sleep and food both refreshed her. She looked about her with the quickened understanding and interest of one whom the fever mists are leaving.

"Mercy, where am I? He cannot find me, can he?"

"No, dearest; you are quite safe. I am taking care of you. When you are strong enough we will take you to Quentin Easter. But for the present, you are better here."

"Not to the House of Dare, Mercy! You will not send me there?"

"You shall never enter the House of Dare again, Alys, unless by your own will."

"Are you sure, Mercy? He is so very—strong!" And the slender frame quivered, till Mercy put her hand down to still the involuntary shudderings.

"I am quite sure," she answered quietly. "Remember, Alys, that you were buried to-day."

"Ah, I wish it had been me! I wish it had been me!"

"Who was it, Alys? She wore all your clothes."

"It must have been that poor girl I saw on the road as I drove home from the meet. She looked so wretched that I stopp'd and spoke to her, and told her to come up to the house."

"Ah—and you gave her clothes!"

"I had nothing else to give, except clothes and some food. I never have any money. I met her at the garden gate. I did not want anyone to know or to see. She was very, very unhappy. She told me a long story which I cannot remember now. But she was very miserable and very cold and hungry. I got her food, and then I got her

294 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

out some of my clothes. She was about my height, and very thin, and it seemed that she was rather like me too. I made her wash, and then put on everything from the beginning; and we buried her old clothes, that were nearly falling to pieces, in the pit where they throw all the dead leaves and rubbish. It was quite easy to hide them away, and nobody would ever hunt there for anything; besides, what would it matter if they did? Only I did not want Rolfe to know.

"The girl went away and I was left alone. I think I wanted by-and-by to follow her. She was a vagrant; and I wanted to be one too. And so I dressed in some more of my old things; and it came over me that I must leave the House of Dare. I could not bear it longer. If I did not find the girl again—I should find a way of escape somehow. I don't remember much more. I suppose I was going to be ill. I know that somebody came who promised to hide me, and to tell nobody—and sometimes I knew that it was Liliās. And that is all I do know. Only I wanted you, Mercy; I always wanted you. But I was afraid that if you knew, Colin would know; and Colin is a Dare. . . ."

Some of the feverish distress was coming back once more. Mercy rose and bent over her again, placing her strong cool hands upon the hot, throbbing temples.

"Alys dear, you are to be afraid of nothing now. You are in my hands. You are to leave everything to me."

"Oh, I will, I will; but, Mercy, you will not tell!"

"I will only tell such people as will help us, Alys. I make no promise, dear, even to you. But remember this, I will not fail you. If I hold you at my mercy, you will never have reason to be sorry that you trusted me. Will you try always to remember that, little Alys? Will you always remember that Mercy is your friend, and that she is to be trusted."

A long deep-drawn sigh as of relief rose as it were from the depth of the girl's innermost being. Her eyes closed as though in slumber, and before Mercy had reached the door, Alys was in truth fast in the embrace of a restoring sleep.

Liliās unlocked the door which led by a few steps into

the seldom-used passage of the Rectory first floor. They passed out together.

"Mercy, what shall you do?" spoke Liliass, in a whisper.

"I shall have to think. It is all very strange. But, ah, how glad I am that—that—we did not bury Alys out there to-day!"

"Are you? Sometimes I have wondered if that would not have been for her the happiest solution. I have asked myself if I was cruel to hold her back from . . ."

"Hush, Liliass! It would have been self-destruction!"

"But she would not have been responsible!"

Mercy made no direct reply. She only repeated the substance of her former words:

"Let us be very thankful that you were there to hold her back—that she is with us still."

"Mercy, I want to tell Arnold. This is his house. How can I keep it back from him—now?"

Mercy considered gravely a few moments.

"Will you bring your husband to Quentin Easter this evening? Come after dinner, when grandmother will have gone to bed. You are right, Liliass; your husband will have to know. But we can trust alike his wisdom and his tenderness. And we shall need both before the matter is ended."

When Mercy returned home she found Hugh in the drawing-room alone. He sprang up at her entrance, and she noted the look upon his face—tense, stern and charged with melancholy. She knew that this tragic happening had touched him somewhat nearly.

"Mercy, where have you been? The carriage has been back ages . . . why did you go out again?"

Mercy's mind was made up quickly.

"Hugh, I have something to say which will greatly astonish you. I say it to you, because you know the law, and we shall want the best legal opinions which can be had. Alys Dare is not dead. I have come back from her side this minute."

His smothered exclamation, the change which swept over his face, alike showed how deeply he was moved. He devoured her with his eyes. He spoke no word as she told her

296 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

tale. Only she heard his deep-drawn breaths, and at the close his stifled words :

"Thank God !"

"I do," said Mercy simply ; "but, Hugh, I see great difficulties before us. She is the wife of Rolfe Dare—and he will . . ."

"He shall never lay hands upon her again. The law can protect helpless women from brutal husbands !"

"That is what I feel sure of. Yet I know so little of its workings. That is why I wanted to tell you, Hugh. We must save Alys ; but it must be done wisely and cautiously."

His eyes were glowing as though lighted by fires from below. Mercy felt that here was a champion for Alys who would serve her well.

"That is true. And her fear of him would in some case be a hindrance. It is that which has made of her a helpless victim through this long year of martyrdom. But we have her now. And Dare holds her as dead ! That is an immense asset in our favour. Ours to keep her in safety till she can make application for protection. It can be done, Mercy ; it shall be done. It is not my branch of the law ; but I will get the very best opinion. She shall not cower again under that hideous domination. Wife she may be to the end of his days—but victim—never again !"

"Yes, Hugh," said Mercy very quietly, "she is his wife ; and nothing can change that. But we can stand between her and that which was killing her and driving her to madness and death. That is what I have promised—and I will keep my word."

CHAPTER XLVIII

IN THE WOODS

"MERCY—I am free! And I come to you once again! You are the only woman I ever loved: the only woman I ever shall love. By all the laws of being—human or divine—you are mine! I claim you as my mate!"

Utterly unexpected was this encounter with Dare in the belt of lonely woodland which bordered his estate. The great hound beside her stiffened at the sound of a voice he never heard without showing symptoms of uneasiness or latent anger. Mercy placed a hand upon his head, glad that so staunch a protector was beside her. Well she understood the meaning of that tense rigidity, the sniffing nostrils, the lashing tail, the deep rumbling growl, which would upon slight provocation break into a wild bay loud enough to awaken the echoes of the woodlands.

As rigid and tense as the dog at her side, Mercy lifted her head and regarded the man before her.

"Captain Dare, you forget yourself."

"I forget everything save that I love you, Mercy! Did I not try to do your bidding once? Did I not leave you—and raise a barrier between us which might have sundered us for life? Have I not fought to do your will? But fate is too hard for us. It is written in the book of fate that you and I are mates. You may strive against it; but you will strive in vain. I am a Dare, and I dare to win and to take whatsoever I will—and I will that you shall come to me at last, Mercy."

"Take care, Captain Dare. The protector you gave me is faithful to his charge. If you use towards me that threatening tone, you will provoke in him an anger which I may

298 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

not be able to control. If I did not make allowance for you, in consideration of your recent loss . . ."

"Loss, loss, loss . . . of that puling girl creature . . . who threw herself into my arms . . . and has repented it ever since. . . ."

"Silence!"

The word rang out brief and clear, like the note of a bugle. For once the man recognised the note of authority, so new to him, and so strange, that he stopped abruptly, his words half uttered; and in the speechless scorn of Mercy's face read something which stirred his passions to their depths.

"Mercy!" he began; but he got no further. A quick step came crashing through the underwood. With a bound a tall form sprang into view, and Mercy's exclamation was charged with a note of mingled relief and anxiety:

"Colin!"

The hound leaped up as though in welcome. On either side of Mercy they ranged themselves, as though to shield her from the touch—or even from the sight—of the baffled man who stood glaring at the group, the blackness of rage in his heart and on his brow.

The kinsmen did not speak. Colin's words were at all times few, and especially so in moments of urgency or excitement.

Mercy quietly placed her hand upon his arm. She desired no collision between the men, for the Dare blood was hot.

"Will you walk back with me, Colin?" she said; and without another look in the direction of Rolfe Dare she turned and went, the hound at her heels, his head moving from side to side, as though he scented peril and would fain guard his mistress from it.

The thunder of a voice raised in malevolent threatenings followed their steps; but Colin held his head high and paid no heed. He spoke quietly to Mercy of indifferent matters till they got out of reach of the evil sound; and then they looked at one another, and he asked:

"Was he insulting you?"

"No ; but the wife whom he believes to be dead !"

"That is like him. He must never have her back !"

"Colin, why does he remain at the House of Dare ?"

"I have wondered that myself. Now I begin to understand. He wants you, Mercy. And he does not know how to believe that his will will not at last prevail."

Mercy looked at him and he at Mercy. Then he asked quietly :

"Do you wish him gone ?"

"It would make many things—easier."

And Colin fell into a deep reverie.

Just at that moment the hound, who had been very uneasy and excited ever since this incident in the wood—and even before, as Mercy had observed without knowing the cause—lifted up his head, sniffed the air with an aspect of intense absorption, and, raising his voice in a deep-throated bay which echoed through the woods, dashed off in the direction of the House of Dare, which lay about a mile distant as the crow flies.

Mercy was so astonished that she did not lift her voice to call him back. Never had she known him to leave her side before. She felt no anxiety ; for Colin was with her ; but her surprise was great.

"What does that mean ? Colin, you do not think . . ."

"That he will attack Rolfe ? I think not. He would do it for your protection—but scarcely without that motive."

The walk home was a silent one. Mercy had much upon her mind at this moment. The dark presence of that black-browed Dare in the lonely house oppressed her strangely. Why would he not go, and leave the coast clear for future action ?

Later in the day Hugh Leigh made his way through those same woodlands in the direction of the House of Dare. It had seemed to him a necessity that he should seek Rolfe Dare, and discover from him, if possible, what his intentions and his future movements would be.

The memory of the blow he had received from that great fist rankled yet. Many times he had been tempted to issue

a summons for assault. Yet that kind of remedy did not appeal to him. He wished that he might use the old-fashioned method of wiping out an insult—that method of crossing swords, or standing face to face pistol in hand, which of old had been the natural fashion of settling such disputes between gentleman.

There was much of the primitive man still left in Hugh Leigh in the first decade of the twentieth century: and his interview two days ago with Alys Dare, frail, white, but energised now by a spirit of courage which had hitherto been lacking in her, had done nothing to allay that hot impulse of rage which dominated him whenever he thought of certain episodes in the past.

It seemed to him possible that Dare might listen if he sought him, and threatened some sort of legal action unless he preferred to take himself out of the country. Or the threat might send him off roaring again. A brawl at the open grave of "his wife" would not be pretty reading in the local papers, and Dare was a proud man. It might be worth trying at least; and Hugh was on his way to Dare with tumultuous and very mixed feelings in his mind. He had seen Colin in the distance, coming away, as it seemed, from the house, and wondered if any stormy interview had already taken place within those walls. Also he had seen a white flitting figure in those woodlands—something small, and strange, which had puzzled him. But he pursued his way intent on his own thoughts; till suddenly, as it grew dim with the swiftly closing dusk of the wane of the year, he saw in the path before him some strange bulk lying. In a moment he recognised what the thing must be. He sprang forward and knelt upon the ground.

It was Rolfe Dare; and he lay face down yards upon the path, a sharp stiletto of foreign workmanship—such as Hugh had seen amongst certain Sicilian treasures that Alys had once displayed to him when he had accompanied Mercy to her grim abode after their arrival there—plunged into his body in such a way as must have transfixed the heart.

He was quite dead; but the flesh was still warm. Hugh

rose to his feet and stood debating with himself for a moment.

There was nothing to be done. The man was past all help. Should he leave him lying there, till hue and cry were raised? What business was it of his? He had no wish to be mixed up in the matter. He had seen Colin not long since coming away—Colin, who was the heir to the property, and who was known to want it and to have been curtly refused as tenant. Instantly Hugh's legal mind grasped the fact that his evidence might look black for Colin. Perhaps Colin had done it! Who could say? The kinsmen were not on friendly terms. At lunch-time that day Hugh had gathered that something of an unpleasant nature had happened, and that Mercy and Colin had had an encounter in these woods with Dare.

Where was Colin now? If only he could get hold of him! Perhaps he could. It was not very long since he sighted him; and he had the old dog with him, and was walking slowly. Very likely he would pause to rest his faithful but infirm companion. At that thought Hugh started back at a brisk run, his mind working hard, his feet carrying him swiftly. When he had run some way back along the track, bearing in the direction towards which Colin had seemed to be going, he paused and sent forth a view halloo which went ringing through the woods. To his satisfaction a voice came answering back, and, after an exchange of hails that lasted for a few minutes, the two men stood side by side, the panting dog following his master at a distance.

"What is it, Hugh?" asked Colin, his brow open, his manner free.

"Do you know where Dare is?"

"No. I went to the house. I had something to say to him. But he was not there. I was hoping to meet him in the woods."

"And you did not?"

"No."

"Well I might have known that you would not strike a man from behind."

"What do you mean?"

Hugh

302 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"Just this. Dare is dead. He has been murdered in his own woods."

"Murdered!"

"Come and see."

They strode on together. They reached the place, and stood over the dead man in silence. Colin touched him, as Hugh had done. He had seen death too often to be deceived. And he noted the position of the shining blade.

"Stabbed from behind—with a Sicilian dagger."

"Yes; do you know the thing?"

"They had several of them yonder in the house. They brought them from Sicily. I remember once telling Alys to carry one with her if she went alone in the woods. You sometimes meet ugly-looking lurkers there."

The two men looked one at the other. Alys was stronger now; and perforce she was left much alone. For as yet her secret was close locked up with a few faithful friends. No servant suspected her seclusion in the old Malt-house; and appearances had to be saved. Life's wheels must revolve as usual.

Had not Hugh seen a slender glittering stiletto on the table the day he had visited Alys? Some such vision seemed to arise before his mind's eye, and his heart contracted.

"Colin, did you see anything in these woods?" he asked.

Colin was silent and thoughtful; his glance sought Hugh's face.

"Did you?"

"I am not sure. I fancied once I saw . . ."

"A flitting, whitish-grey form, small and slender?"

"Yes. You saw it also?"

The men dropped their eyes upon the corpse, with the stiletto through the still heart. Colin spoke first:

"They had better think it me," he said. "I am the heir."

CHAPTER XLIX

WHOSE THE DEED?

MERCY's face was very pale ; but the expression it wore was resolutely calm.

Hugh was alone with her in her private room, which partook less in its aspect of boudoir than library.

Books lined two walls ; there was a large and finely inlaid bureau beneath one rather high window. Another window opened upon the garden, and set into a recess beside the fireplace was a deep cupboard whose shelves contained books and ledgers and boxes filled with copies of all important papers concerning estate matters, for the easy reference of the young mistress, whose aim and purpose it was to exercise oversight and a wise and temperate authority in every matter where her own interests and those of others were concerned.

But now, in the gloaming of this late autumn evening, her thoughts were far away from her own private affairs. For Hugh had come, and had brought with him the news of that awful thing which had happened in the woods round Dare ; and of the murdered man lying stabbed to the heart in his own domain.

"Where is Colin now ? " asked Mercy.

"Gone to summon the police, and take them to the place. He wished to do that himself, and to send me to you."

"Hugh, who could have done it ? "

"That is what the law will have to find out. As matters stand now it will be known that Colin and I were in the wood that afternoon. He was not on good terms with his kinsman, and by his death succeeds to the property. I was known to have had a quarrel with him, and he was seen to strike me not so very long ago."

304 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"Hugh! What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say—neither more nor less."

"But you could prove that Colin had nothing to do with it? He was in another part of the wood when you saw him."

"Yes. But I cannot say from what spot he reached the place I saw him. It was not the direct way from—the body; but what of that?"

"Hugh, I do not understand you!"

"And Colin can testify that I came straight from the murdered man to summon him; and that the body was not cold when we reached it together. There you have another hypothesis. Two men meet in the wood—and one owes the other a grudge . . ."

"Hugh—you are keeping something from me!"

He looked her straight in the eyes.

"I am going to keep nothing from you, Mercy; because for one thing I could not, for another, you have the right to know. Both of us saw creeping through the wood something small and white—a shrouded figure enveloped in a pale grey or white garment like a misty veil. And the same thought came to us both."

"What thought, Hugh?"

"What was Alys doing this afternoon?"

Mercy started, and her face grew just a little more white.

"Listen, Mercy; let me tell you every detail. Then we must set our wits to work. Dare was stabbed with a long Sicilian stiletto. Several of these weapons they brought back with them. They have been seen at the House of Dare. Alys is known to have had one in her possession . . ."

Mercy started, and her eyes dilated.

"Am I right in thinking that I saw one in her hiding-place over the Malt-house, when I went to see her?"

"Yes," answered Mercy quietly; "she had it when Lilius found her. It has lain there on some table ever since."

"I thought that myself. Now, Mercy, listen. At the present moment there can be no thought of Alys, for Alys is dead. But suppose the time comes (as come it must) for

her reappearance—what then? Do you think that no suspicion will arise?—no questions be asked? The fact that she fled from her husband and home and was drowned on the moors has raised much speculation. When this is known to be an error; when she is known to have fled and lived in hiding, what will be thought? That her brain was half turned by her fears of Dare is already freely canvassed. She must have been living in an agony of fear lest he should find and reclaim her. We know that this was so. . . .”

“Hugh, do you think yourself that . . . ?”

“I do not know what to think. Mercy, could she have walked all that way? A woman’s strength, when a passion of purpose comes upon her, especially if her brain be somewhat unhinged, has been known before this to accomplish marvellous feats. I want to know where she has been this afternoon, and what she has done. Can you tell me that?”

“She has been alone. She must have been alone. Lilia had to spend most of the day in the town. There was an important meeting there. They lunched early and went. I had intended to go across; but I was prevented. There was an accident at the farm. I was sent for. I am only just back. . . .”

“Mercy, will you go with me to Alys now? It is our best chance, before this thing is known; before I am called upon to give evidence or answer questions. . . .”

“Let us go at once,” said Mercy. And they went.

They scarcely spoke during the brief swift walk through the gathering shadows of night. Mercy’s brain and heart were in a tumult. Only that morning Dare had been pressing upon her his passionate protestations of love. Now he lay dead with a dagger through his heart. And Colin was the only person who knew of that insult offered her: Colin who had access to the house of Dare and its shining weapons: Colin who was in the wood. . . . But Dare had been struck from behind! That was the impossible thing! Yet Alys . . . How could those fragile hands of hers . . .

“Where is your dog?”

306 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

The question was suddenly put by her companion and Mercy started.

"Dare left me to-day in the woods—the first time such a thing has ever happened; and he has not come home yet."

Mercy had her own way of reaching the Malt-house, without directly approaching the Rectory. She had a key of the little lower door, and could enter at will. She lighted the lantern to guide their steps, and soon they were within the shuttered and softly lighted room where Alys lay upon a couch beside the fire, her fragile beauty and slender limbs seeming to be refutation sufficient for any theory such as the one which was occupying the minds of her visitors.

The room looked cheery and homelike. A screen hid the bed. There were flowers in vases upon the table, and the eyes of the guests swept swiftly over the room and its articles of furniture. Mercy remembered how the shining stiletto had been wont to lie side by side with an ivory paper-cutter. The paper-cutter lay in its accustomed place—the stiletto was gone!

There had been some talk as to whether Alys might go out when the day was dim and dark, as it had been to-day, well wrapped in a cloak—a pale grey cloak hung upon the door in readiness—such as the market women of the district often wore, with a hood to draw over the head and face. But hitherto she had always shrunk from any such effort, and it had not been pressed.

But Mercy noted to-day a pair of boots, stained with mud, lying in a corner, and pointing at them smilingly she said:

"So, Alys dear, you have been out?"

"No, no. . . ." she began, with a frightened look; but seeing the tell-tale foot-gear she laughed weakly, with changing colour, and added rather lamely: "I mean only just for a few minutes. It frightened me, and I came back."

"What frightened you, dear?"

She put her hands over her eyes.

"It is always the same thing—always the same! I know that one day Rolfe will find me—and carry me back—and nobody can stop him. I can't bear it! I can't bear it! Mercy, I felt to-day that I should kill myself sooner or later."

And I flung my stiletto out of the window lest . . . And then I wanted it again. And I went down to look for it. But it was gone. . . ."

She was shuddering all over like an aspen. Hugh stood with his back to the fire, his young face drawn and strangely tense.

Mercy knelt down beside Alys and wound her arms about her.

"Dearest, can you bear some news which we have brought you ?"

She felt how the slender frame quivered and palpitated, and her own heart throbbed with heavy anxious beatings.

"News ?" whispered Alys, between white lips, "what news ?"

"News which will take away that fear of which you have just spoken. Alys, your husband will not ever come to claim you any more. For he is—dead."

"Dead ?"

The girl suddenly sat upright, pushing the loosened hair out of her eyes. These great dark eyes were dilated with a strange mixture of amazement, horror, and some emotion which was less easily interpreted.

"Mercy—did you say—dead ?"

"Yes, dear. It is very terrible. He was killed in his own woods. Hugh and Colin found him. . . ."

Alys sprang up and spoke wildly, flinging her hands above her head in a passionate gesture of unrestrained emotion.

"Stabbed to the heart by a Sicilian stiletto ! Mercy, tell me, . . .—was that not so ?"

"Alys dear, yes. That was how he was found. Stabbed in the back with a weapon very like the one you had here. . . ."

"It was the one—the very same ! At least it well might be ! Then it was not a dream—I am not mad ! But they have pursued us—pursued him—here to England !"

Mercy stood up, looking at Hugh, who now came forward and spoke, gently and quietly, as to an overwrought and excited child.

308 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"Now, Alys, you understand that this matter is a very serious one; and I have come to you hoping to get some light upon it. That your husband is dead means a great deal to you, and will set you free from a vast pressure of fear and apprehension. But the manner of his death has been terrible, and is very mysterious. If you know anything—any facts—which will throw light upon it, will you tell them to me? I must of necessity be a good deal mixed up in the matter, as I was the person who found the body. . . ."

Her great dark eyes met his with a childlike candour and sweetness. Hugh had often before this been like a tower of strength to Alys in moments of uncertainty or of fear.

"It is the Vendetta," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"That is what they call it in Sicily. It is the avenger of blood—the vengeance that always comes at last! No, I do not know all the story. But Rolfe was always in danger there. He told me so—and laughed; and went armed. He killed many men—I knew it, if the law did not. He got much gold—much land. And they never forgive. They have followed him here. I saw a face to-day—out of my window. That is really why I flung the stiletto. I was so frightened. Then it went. I thought it a dream—or that I was going mad. And I tried to find my stiletto; but I could not. . . . Perhaps that dark-faced Sicilian took it. And it was he who killed Rolfe! I always thought—there—that it would happen. But not here—not here!"

She gazed from Mercy's pale, grave face to that of Hugh, which was grave also, and yet triumphant in its aspect. He took both her hands in his, and suddenly stooping his head he imprinted a kiss, reverent and tender, upon each.

"You have rolled away a stone from my heart," he said; and rising to his feet he went across to Mercy and laid a hand upon her shoulder.

"The mystery is solved," he said, in a voice which was not quite as steady or level as usual. "It is Vendetta."

CHAPTER L

VENDETTA !

COLIN, meantime, with grave face and absorbed aspect, had made his way to the innocent-looking and picturesque cottage near to the village of Quentin Easter, where the village constable had his dwelling.

The man was at home, as it chanced, and after wiring the news to the town, assured that it would bring out more skilled assistance, the medical officer and so forth, they proceeded at once to the spot, the local surgeon being also called up, and arriving in his motor to accompany them.

It was quite dark now ; and the constable took a lantern with him to guide their steps. The doctor, who was something of a new-comer—a certain Mr Hunt, a clever surgeon and interesting man, rather a crony of Colin's, not long through his hospitals, where he had held the post of house-surgeon with great credit for a year—asked numerous questions as they hurried through the dank and dripping woods. Colin could only give the bare fact. They had left the body just as it lay (knowing that life was extinct) for the authorities to deal with.

Colin walked along in a dreamlike mood. As they passed the Dare boundary he felt, with a curious sensation betwixt triumph and pain, that he was standing now upon his own land. He was next in the succession. Unless Alys was to bear a child, nothing now stood between him and the Dare heritage—the grim old house which he had always loved, and the land with which he felt that he could do great things, if he might but wield the powers of its possessor.

How well he recalled the far-off days when, as a small and somewhat fragile boy, his mind divided betwixt fear

310 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

and childish hero-worship of the man whose iron hand controlled his destiny, he had first met Mercy Quentin, and learnt the joy and comfort of a childish friendship and comradeship. In the darkness of the rustling woodlands he seemed again to hear her sweet, earnest little voice instructing him in the mysteries connected with property and the "hen's tail" which had so much to do with succession!

Now by this right of entail, whatever disposition Rolfe Dare might have made of his Sicilian lands and the moneys he had acquired there or elsewhere, the Dare house and property with its revenues must now pass to him—save for that contingency which he did not believe to exist. And standing upon the threshold of the new life, he was confronted by a strange and desperate possibility! What if he should be suspected of his kinsman's death!

The thing might be. Indeed it was more than possible. Was he not in the woods that afternoon? Had he not been to the house, and might he not have taken that weapon thence, of which several were to be found there? Colin faced his peril sanely and with a mind alive and awake. He was the one to gain by his kinsman's death. And he and Rolfe, though they had not actually quarrelled, were by no means upon friendly terms. His errand that day had been to speak his mind quite freely as to what had passed that morning in the woods. If he were to be asked the nature of his errand, and if he spoke the truth, he must needs say that it had not been upon a friendly mission he was bent. Mercy's name should not be dragged in; but he might have to admit that a quarrel was like to have ensued. If this fact were elucidated, how about that other fact—the dead man lying in the wood with a dagger in his heart?

And that fitting, small, slim figure? What connection had that with the crime? Colin set his lips close, and held his head high. He should not speak of that—unless—unless—he were sure that Alys had been safe within walls all that day. Not that one could be suspected who was held to be dead. But soon that hypothesis must be upset. Alys could not remain hidden for ever.

And then—what of that flitting figure—in Dare's woods ; and its owner's fall beneath a mysterious blow aimed from behind ?

" Ha ! " exclaimed the doctor, " here we are ! "

There they were indeed ; beside the prostrate stiffening corpse of a mighty man laid low. Colin stood quietly beside the two men who bent over to make their examination. And in the deep silence of the whispering woods, his quick, hunter's ears caught a distant sound.

Colin listened intently. Surely he knew that sound. It was the deep-throated bay of a hound. The hound Dare ! He was sure of it ! He had heard that note before. He heard it now again, more fierce, insistent and menacing than ever before.

What did it mean ? The dog Dare never left Mercy's side. Yet Colin was assured he was not mistaken. That was his voice—out in these lonely woods. And if anything was meant by that deep, sonorous bay, it was a call for help.

" Hunt," he said, " if you are satisfied that our report was true, and that Dare must have died instantly upon receiving that wound . . . "

" Not a doubt of it—clean through the heart. "

" Exactly ; then will you and Alcott leave the body for a few minutes, and follow me ? We may light upon a clue. I cannot tell. But the dog who always follows Miss Quentin, and was with her this morning in the woods, is baying somewhere at a distance now. I wish to trace where he is—mounting guard, as I guess, over some creature he has discovered. I may not be right ; but that is my surmise. Will you come ? "

" Certainly. I think we ought to leave the body where it is for those in higher authority to examine before it is moved. Also as few footprints round it as possible should be left. If there is anything to be gained meantime by following up this clue, by all means lead the way. What do you say, Alcott ? "

" I'm of the same mind, sir. We can do nothing here, and had better leave things for the Inspector to see. He'll

312 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

be here on his motor within the hour. So if Mr Dare will take us . . ."

Colin had been seeking to locate the sound. He had some of the hunter's skill and acumen in this matter. He set out in a certain direction through the tangled underwood; from time to time he sent forth a ringing hail, and each time was answered by the long-drawn bay of the hound.

The sound grew plainer and louder. Now they all heard it with equal distinctness. Colin soon guessed where they would find the dog. There was a deep hollow in the woods, a dell at the bottom of which a stream of water ran, and in this dell was a natural cave, which tradition said had often sheltered fugitives from justice for weeks and even months together.

The constable had a lantern. Mr Hunt had brought the acetylene lamp from his motor car. In a moment the dell was illuminated by a shaft of brilliant light. The hound standing on guard uttered a deep-throated bay, and Colin sprang forward to the entrance of the cave—but warily; for who could tell the nature of the creature which presumably lurked there?

A torrent of words broke forth—words uttered in a tongue which Colin recognised to be Sicilian dialect. Once he had spent some months in Sicily during his years of travel. He had a gift for acquiring languages, and Latin and Italian both in measure helped.

Mastering up his memories of the language, he called to the man to come forth; and held the dog Dare by the collar whilst this summons was obeyed.

A burst of hacking, racking coughing had succeeded the flow of rapid, excited, fierce yet appealing words. A man small and bent, lean to attenuation, and with a stain of blood upon his lips, advanced slowly into the circle of light, his dark face drawn and hollow and ashen, his shrunken limbs shaking as with palsy; but his eyes fierce and indomitable still.

"Who are you," asked Colin, "and whence do you come?"

"I have come from over the seas. No matter who I am.

I have come to perform the mission upon which I was sent. And I have done this. I am a dying man. This accursed climate has killed me. But what matter? My task is over. But for the dog I might have escaped. But he knew me—I brought him up! Once I was his master! Was it love—or was it hatred? Who will ever know? He found me to-day . . . in the morning . . . and followed me . . ." A burst of coughing interrupted the speech. Blood again stained the hem of the pale grey cloak which he held to his lips.

"Had we not better get him away?" spoke Colin to Mr Hunt. "He is wet to the skin, shivering with cold and fever. . . ."

"Let him finish his story first," said the young surgeon gravely, unscrewing his flask and handing it to the man, who had sunk upon a prostrate tree. "It is important we should know all. And there may not be much time. At any moment, with exertion . . ."

His gesture was significant. The Sicilian drained the flask and gave it back. For the moment it brought warmth to his chilled limbs, strength to his failing frame.

"It is Vendetta!" he cried, flinging forth a thin arm, and in such rapid dialect that Colin could barely follow, he spoke the tale of Rolfe Dare's deeds of violence, pillage and robbery. "He has taken life—his life was forfeit. Again and yet again we sought to compass his end; but he was clever as the devil—who has been his friend through all. And so he escaped us; and upon me fell the task to follow him here. I was long in finding him. But I succeeded at last. I have lived in this accursed den for ten full days, in cold and wet and misery. Ah, how it rains in this sun-forsaken land! I was doomed before—oh, I knew it! It has made no difference. But I feared I would die before . . . But I was watching always. And to-day the dog found me. I had brought him up. But I feared him—that he would betray me. So I dodged and dodged and slipped hither and thither into strange places many miles away. And for a moment I shook him off; and I found myself before a strange building. And forth from a window there

314 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

looked a face—the face of one who was dead! And a great fear fell on me; and I stood as a stone. And the dead woman opened the window and flung to me a knife. And by that I knew I had the sign that to-day the deed should be done. And I crept back into the woods—and I saw him coming, and I waited till he had passed by; and then I sprang! . . . But the dog had found me again. And he would not let me out of his sight. I had brought him up. And so I ran hither hoping that when night fell he would leave me. And I was deadly cold, and weary as a man who lies down to die. But the dog stayed with me—as though he knew my need. I had brought him up. And he called aloud with his great voice many times. And he would not cease for my telling him. Yet I had brought him up—and he knew me. I know not whether it was in love or in hatred that he watched me, tracked me, would not leave me. But what matter? I am as a dead man. It is nothing now what happens to my poor body. I have done my task. The enemy is slain—our vengeance is consummated.” He lifted his skinny arm aloft and cried: “Vendetta! Vendetta! Vendetta!”

Then he suddenly collapsed. Colin sprang forward and seized him in his arms. Blood was streaming from his lips.

“I thought as much,” spoke the surgeon, stepping to the prostrate form as Colin laid it down at a sign from him. “It is over. He is dead.”

CHAPTER LI

BY A TIDELESS SEA

QUIET, peaceful Quentin Easter was stirred to its depths ! All in a moment it had become a centre of excitement and wonder, not for its own locality alone ; but for the whole country.

A murder, mysterious, sensational, terrible, had taken place in this humdrum place : a murder ringed about with elements of romance which made of it a nine days' wonder in the land.

Much of the story which led up to the tragedy remained still shrouded in mystery — a veil which might never be altogether lifted. But at least the son of the south, who had dogged to these more northern latitudes the man upon whom the vengeance of the Vendetta was to be wreaked, had spoken enough before his death to put the clue into the hands of the law.

He himself had paid the price of his deed with his life. There was no criminal trial to excite further public attention.

But ere the thrill of the story and its memory had passed from men's minds, a new impulse to wonder and curiosity was given by the rumour which circulated like wildfire, and was corroborated later with authority, that the wife of the murdered man, supposed herself to have met her death in tragic fashion on the wild moorlands a week or so before, was not dead, but alive, and in Sicily, in her husband's house where the first portion of her married life had been passed.

Why she had fled thither secretly, why she had concealed her whereabouts from husband and friends, so that all believed her dead, was not known or explained. What was

316 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

explained was the fact that upon the very day of her own flight she had clothed in her own raiment a poor wandering girl of about her own height and figure, whose own clothes were now found where the lady said they had hidden them—and so by a perfectly unforeseen coincidence, provided the proof of her own demise, in which the whole place including her husband, had believed.

When it was known where she was, Miss Quentin organised a family party to go out and join her in the place which by law was now her own property. The Dare estate in England passed to the next in the entail—Colin Dare. But as the murdered man left no will, all else which he possessed became the property of his wife, and it was surmised that she had appealed to her friends in England to come to her aid, and these had responded in generous fashion.

As a matter of fact, it was Hugh Leigh who had organised the flight of Alys to Sicily, where she was supposed to have been all the time. When he had brought to her the tidings of Colin's discovery in the wood—corroborating all her own suspicions and fears—she had held out pleading, helpless hands to him :

" Hugh, tell me what I must do . . . help me, help me. I will never keep that lovely terrible place which was filched away by force or fraud—which has cost my husband his life. You must help me, Hugh, to rid myself of it. Oh, Hugh, be my friend—tell me what I can do. I am all alone—so frightened ! "

Hugh had risen to this appeal ; and first he had taken her to his mother, through the night in a fast-running motor car. Hugh had never appealed to his mother in vain. Before twenty-four hours had passed she and Robert, Hugh and Alys were on their way to Sicily. From thence Alys wrote to her friends at Quentin Easter. She wanted Mercy ; she wanted Colin—Rolfe's kinsman ; she wanted friends about and around her to give her comfort, help, support.

And they responded to her appeal. Colonel Quentin with Joyce took up his abode at Quentin Easter with Lady Sarah. Miss Marjoribanks was another guest there.

whom Mercy could entrust all kinds of small duties and services for her aged grandmother. Lord and Lady Parminster were just thinking of taking a trip to the south, and offered themselves for the Sicilian party, whilst Jack, whose long leave was just coming due, was all agog for an expedition which might lead to excitements and perhaps to fighting! For the very name Vendetta stirred his young blood, and as he expressed himself to Mercy: "Since your heart is adamant, and proof against all my devotion and blandishments, sure I may perhaps console myself with a dark-eyed daughter of Sicily, who will love me as I feel I deserve to be loved!" Then Mercy, with her kindling smile so friendly, cousinly and sweet, had answered: "Ah, how charming that would be! By all means come, Jack, and see what effect your manly charms will have upon the susceptible hearts of the ladies of the south!"

Another reason why the Parminsters were pleased to join this party was that their daughter, Lady Sally, who the previous year had thrown over her theories of independent spinsterhood at the assault upon her affections by Jim Maltby, was expected shortly to be leaving Egypt, where her husband had been doing valuable work in connection with the great dams on the Nile, for a trip home; and a halt at Sicily would be a pleasant interlude for them both. Jim's work had been so excellent, that though he was no longer wanted in Egypt, some other appointment would certainly come his way before long. Sally's pride in her husband was something that her family found entertaining and Mercy refreshing.

Altogether it was with a happy heart that Mercy said farewell to England during the shortest and coldest of its winter days, to find herself before long in a land of vivid sunlight and balmy airs, where the grip of frost is scarcely felt, and the sea lies sparkling in its azure loveliness, whilst the solemn hillsides, rising up in majesty and grandeur, glitter like powdered gold in the strong light of the brilliant days, and fade into unimaginable mystery as the light is withdrawn, and the solemn moon rides high in a sky of burnished steel.

318 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

Alys was waiting for Mercy and her party—an Alys fragile and frail, looking taller and more stately in the plain and simple black which she wore—black without any of the conventional ostentation of the widow's garb. They had paused in Paris for Lady Leigh to see to this matter. Mercy was half startled by the vision of this tall and slender woman, with brilliant shining eyes, and delicate rose flush upon the thin white cheek, and the light of hope and happiness radiating from her in some way impossible to define.

And the beauty of her surroundings! That noble pile of buildings, which was rather palace than house; the long marble terraces; the orange and lemon trees, the creepers which were never quite out of blossom—the grandeur of the rising hills behind, the sparkle of the tideless sea in front!

"Oh, Alys—dearest! What a wonderful place to find you in!"

"Ah, is it not—now! Mercy, I shall not have it long. I do not want it. It is all too big and grand—and lonely! Oh, the days I have spent here . . ." She caught herself up, bit her lip, and looked at Mercy with an infinite sweetness in her sad dark eyes. "All that is over—and he has paid the penalty. I want to shut away the past—to bury it deep, deep in kind forgetfulness. Here it would always be coming back. I never could live here. Besides, I could never feel it mine. Hugh is trying to unravel the tangle. At first it seemed hopeless; but now the people are beginning to speak out. We have the best lawyer from Palermo. He understands a great deal. It is justice I want—not money. . . . Not other people's land and property which was won away from them. . . . I do not know how. That is what is so difficult to trace. Probably it was through gaming—perhaps through cheating. . . . Oh, who can tell? There have been men killed over it . . . that deadly Vendetta feud. And I will make restitution. I do not want his wealth. I feel I have no claim upon it. I had left him. I could not bear it any longer—that life which I have promised Hugh not to think of any more. Oh, Mercy, you do not know how good Hugh has been to me! And his father and mother too! If I had been their daughter . . ."

She paused whilst a lovely blush dyed her face, and Mercy put an arm about her and kissed her tenderly.

Hugh's bronzed and beaming face was a sight to see. He gripped Mercy fast by both hands, and imprinted a cousinly kiss of welcome on her cheek.

"It is good to have you here! Yes, Mercy, you were the wise one! It is Alys I am waiting for now—it has always been Alys—only I did not know it. I thought . . ."

"You were always the dearest of dear boys," said Mercy, "but I knew that somewhere there was an 'Alys' waiting for you. You have made her a different Alys already; and now you are helping her to despoil herself of property which most prospective husbands would persuade her to retain—that is like you, Hugh!"

"Well, as for that, Alys knows her own mind; and I agree with her about looking into these things, and getting rid of anything like a blood feud or curse. I was brought up old-fashioned enough not to hanker after ill-gotten gain. And she will be well dowered in any case. There is a lot of funded property which no one here lays any sort of claim to. There is nothing to say how it was acquired. She will have all that as her dowry. But this—it will go. I am glad to be here now, to see it all—to see her in this setting. It is a picture I shall carry always in my heart. But then, having done all to her wishes—I want to take her away. Mercy, you wise person, how long must I wait?"

"Dear Hugh, you know you have her heart! Her secret is written in her eyes whenever you approach—when-ever she speaks your name! But for the hand—ah, you must be a little patient. Her husband met a terrible death not long ago. But surely the waiting will not be very hard! Already the knight is doing his lady's will, engaged in her crusade. He wears her colours in his heart, if not upon his helm. Surely that is enough!"

Happy, golden days, beside a tideless sea!

It was almost like a Quentin Easter family gathering, as Mercy often felt; only here she had no part of hostess to play. Lady Leigh, acting deputy to Alys, by her own earnest entreaty, was in all practical matters the hostess,

320 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

though Alya took the head of the long table, and seemed sometimes scarcely able to believe it was not all a dream—that ring of happy familiar faces surrounding her.

Sally and Jim arrived in due course, bringing added mirth and interest for all. So much to tell, so much to hear, so much to see, marvel at and examine! Jim was entranced by the engineering wonders of the castle-like place and its terraces and caverns; whilst Sally's gay laugh rang all over the gardens, as she shadowed Mercy, for ever curious, eager, delighted—so infinitely happy herself that she must needs marvel that Mercy had not followed her example.

"You might have had Hugh, you might have had Jack, you might have had Jim. I believe you might have had that awful Dare . . . and I don't know how many others; for you are as close as an oyster, Mercy. Anyone not behind the scenes might think you never had a chance! You have so many wonderful qualities, Mercy! But I can't believe that you will remain in single blessedness for ever. Mercy, be an angel—and tell me one thing! Is it Colin?"

For Colin was coming along the sunny terrace in search of Mercy. And Colin, when not engaged with Hugh in disentangling his kinsman's affairs, and recalling all he ever knew of him, was very often with Mercy in this place of sunshine and glamour. And as Mercy turned a welcoming look towards him now, Sally saw her face illumined by a smile which had been Mercy's chiefest weapon from her childhood for the ensnaring of hearts.

The quick eyes of the young wife passed to that other face, the handsome, characteristic one, with the strong Dare features strangely softened and brightened by an expression never seen in those of his name who had won strange reputations in days of old. There was light in the eyes beneath the broad brow, which gave character and distinction to the somewhat narrow face beneath. A man whom any woman might be proud to love, Sally decided, and a man whose love was worth the winning. And had Colin Dare ever looked at any woman in his life save Mercy Quentin? Sally doubted it. And now he was lord of the House of Dare,

and a match not unworthy of the heiress of Quentin Easter.

But who could tell? She could not. Though she watched the pair walk away together, whilst she joined her husband in a scramble amongst the gold-powdered hills, touched at this hour with the plumlike bloom which preceded the dying of the early spring day.

Jim would laugh when she asked him what he thought about Colin and Mercy, and suggest that they would settle their own business without the able assistance of Lady Sally Maltby. But Sally did not believe he knew a bit better than she herself how the land lay, and told him so, whereupon he exclaimed with righteous fervour:

"Bless you, my dear, I should think not. If you can't see through that stone wall, nobody else can!"

CHAPTER LII

CONCLUSION

THE long June day was drawing to its lovely close. The dark woods about the House of Dare lay bathed in a rosy glow which endowed them with a solemn and almost mystic radiance.

Overhead the homing rooks flew high and steady on outspread wings, looking strangely black against the flush of the waning day.

The great lake of Dare lay like a sheet of burnished silver—a sea of glass mingled with fire—reflecting back the outlines of the trees which clothed its margin with a fidelity unbroken and quiescent, suggesting the existence of another realm of beauty and light beneath the shining water.

A still, sweet, solemn place, full of a soft mystery of its own. And beside the water two persons, a man and a woman, and between them a grave which he had just filled in.

In Mercy's sweet eyes there was a little glint, like the light lying upon the water where a long shaft smote through the tree trunks of the solemn pines and kissed it into a sparkle of gold.

"Dear old General Muggs!" she softly breathed as Colin, his task ended, stood upright, just leaning lightly on his spade.

They looked at one another across the old dog's grave, and Colin said:

"He was the first thing you ever gave me, Mercy."

And she, raising her eyes to his, made answer:

"Not quite the first, Colin."

"Was it not? What came before?"

"My friendship," she answered.

He held out his hand with a smile, and she took it for a moment, held it, smiled, and gently loosed it.

"Your friendship to me is not a gift exactly, nor yet any concrete thing of which I say—it was mine then—at such and such a time. It is something different from that . . . an atmosphere, an emanation—what you will. It is the light of a guiding star that never fails, which shines always in the sky, whether its light be veiled for a time or not. It is the thing you come to trust in. You know it will not fail. There are no eclipses—no changes. Once given—always there—no wavering, no withdrawal."

"Of course not, Colin. Just friendship."

"Not quite; just Mercy's friendship."

The smile awakening in her eyes flickered softly outwards and flooded all her face.

"Is there so much difference, Colin?"

The eager boy light seemed to leap into his eyes.

"Mercy, do you not know the qualities of your friendship, and what they mean to me?"

"Our friendship is a very beautiful thing, Colin. I thank God every day of my life for giving it to me."

They looked at one another over that narrow grave.

"Mercy, do you remember what I said when I went away? Do you remember the promise you gave me?"

She bent her head smiling still, looking down at the green sod which hid the faithful old dog, whose long, long life had passed softly away in a long deep sleep, and who lay in the heart of the woodlands he had loved, with the two who loved him best, and whom he had loved so well, standing together over his grave.

"You took care of him for me. You said he should be alive when I came back; and he has lived with me again in the House of Dare. You said that when I came back you would not be married. You are not married still. Mercy, I want you to make me another promise to-day, here in these woods where we played as children, here beside the grave of dear old Muggs."

"Yes, Colin?"

324 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

"Mercy, I want you to promise me this one thing: that if the day comes when you do marry, it shall not change or spoil the quality of that friendship which you have given me."

"I promise you that, Colin."

The gravely serious eyes lifted to his face with the slow kindling of light in their depths, soon to be merged in the smile which would flood the face with sunshine, brought vividly back to the heart of the man the child's eyes as he had seen them first, as they had looked forth at him, half with welcoming sweetness, half with a certain tentative compassion, when she had first come upon him, with his arms round the neck of Captain Muggs, upon the occasion of the festivities of her seventh birthday.

How long ago it seemed!—and yet it might have been but yesterday! For the eternal spirit of childhood lingered yet in the heart of Mercy the woman. That was one of the qualities which time would never change, an endowment of which the world and its wisdom would never rob her.

Then he smiled back into her face, with that sudden triumphant shining in his eyes which brought the boy Colin back to her—the boy as he had been in those happy moments when no shadow of mystery or of fear lay athwart his path.

"Thank you, Mercy. You have promised. I know how your promises are kept."

Earnestly she looked at him. Into her eyes a tiny spark of wistfulness crept—and with it something of a faint tentative compassion, which illumined her face with an expression that made him catch his breath.

"Colin . . . and you, yourself . . . those words you spoke once. . . . Do you still feel the same?"

Grave was his face; but full of a high courage and lofty resolution.

"I have not changed, Mercy. I have thought of it again and yet again. There is something . . . shall I call it curse? . . . upon the name of Dare. It breaks out in many forms. We ourselves have seen the tragedy of it. Let the name die with me. It is not a heritage to transmit

to another. Did I not suffer myself? Did not my mother suffer cruelly? Then Alys? Her happiness now makes her forget all that went before; but it well-nigh drove her to madness and death. Mercy, that must never happen again."

She understood him. In the depths of her being she agreed. The mysteries of life are very many; some of them are very terrible. But there are compensations too!

With shining eyes she held out her hands. With shining eyes he took them in his.

As they had stood in childhood many a time with the young dog between them, so they stood now—the grave of the old dog alone dividing them.

"And whatever else betides, I have the friendship of Mercy."

Almost solemnly she took up his word and repeated it:

"And whatever else betides—you have always and always—the friendship of Mercy."

THE END